

## **ALLERGIC INHALANT DERMATITIS (ATOPY)**

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“Hey Doc... the dog’s at it again... scratching up a storm like he does this time every year, and not a flea in sight! What’s the problem?”

This is a question that every small animal practitioner must address day in and day out, and though fleas continue to be the undisputed champions of allergic skin disease, canine atopy surely deserves a close second place.

Allergic inhalant dermatitis (atopy) is the canine equivalent of hay fever in human beings. Whereas in humans histamine producing cells predominate in the respiratory tract, these cells are more numerous in the skin of dogs. Exposure to airborne allergens in sensitized dogs, therefore, is much more likely to result in itchy skin than the sneezing associated with allergies in people. Itchiness, especially involving the facial region, feet and armpits, is the hallmark of this disease. There is often some degree of ear inflammation as well, and in some cases the itching may have a more widespread distribution. Symptoms may first be observed between 1 and 2 years of age, but cases developing up to 7 years of age are not unusual. Outdoor allergens include various molds, grasses, weeds and trees, accounting for the often seasonal nature of this condition. Some dogs, however, are affected year round due to sensitivities to indoor allergens such as house dust, house dust mite, wool, kapok, and feathers.

Breeds predisposed to atopy include the terriers (Westies, Scotties, Sealyhams, Wirehaired Fox Terriers, Miniature Schnauzers, etc.), setter (English, Irish), Golden Retrievers, Dalmations, Lhasa Apsos and English Bulldogs. Cats may also be affected (albeit less frequently than dogs), with such signs as small crusts peppered over the skin’s surface, hair loss or more localized skin lesions. Chronically affected individuals may develop problems such as seborrhea, excessive pigmentation of the skin or skin infections. Up to %80 of atopic dogs are also allergic to fleas.

Diagnosis of atopy is based on clinical signs, intradermal skin testing (usually through a veterinary dermatologist) and, more recently, blood tests (RAST/ELISA) for circulating antibodies to various allergens. While somewhat less sensitive than skin testing, it allows for the convenience of testing through your regular veterinarian.

Symptomatic treatment for itching and dermatitis is achieved through the use of antihistamines, corticosteroids, topical preparations (medicated shampoos, etc.) and nutritional supplements. Avoidance of offending allergens, when possible, is also helpful. Hyposensitization (allergy shots) is the treatment of choice for those animals which show symptoms for more than 3-4 months of the year. If this approach is elected, improvement is unlikely before 3 months, but almost 75% of treated dogs show improvement within 1 year.

While New England winters often provide a welcome “intermission” for pets with allergic skin disease, it’s a good time for pet owners to consider this common cause of itchiness, and visit their veterinarian if symptoms develop in months to come.