

# Allergies and your Pet

Allergic skin disease is one of the most common problems veterinarians see. Allergies are prevalent in both dogs and cats and have many different causes and, therefore, many different treatments. If your pet (or self or children) have allergies we already know how frustrating rating these conditions can be. This handout is intended to give you an overview of allergic skin disease so that we can work towards helping your pet be his/her healthiest and avoid excessive medication, but not meant to replace proper examinations and test or conversations with the veterinarians.

## **What are the signs of allergic skin diseases?**

Animals with allergies have itchy skin and or ears. Skin tends to be red, irritated, and inflamed. Scratching can cause hair loss, even bleeding, and raw places. Over time, with chronic, smoldering allergies, the skin can become dark, discolored, and abnormally thickened (elephant like). Cats with allergic skin diseases commonly have pin-point scabs or crust on their necks and backs.

## **What is the best way to treat allergies?**

The best way to treat allergies is to AVOID what one is allergic to. For example, pets with flea allergies can be helped with flea control that kills fleas. Food allergies sufferers benefit from avoiding certain food ingredients. However, some things cannot be avoided all together (for example: grass pollen) and pets may need medication to control the allergy.

## **What could my pet be allergic to?**

Basically animals are allergic to three types of things. Although it is easy to look at an animal and tell that they are allergic, but it can take some investigative work to determine what they are allergic to.

*Fleas:* Flea allergies are the most common allergy in dog and cats. When fleas bite our pets, they inject a small amount of flea saliva into the pet's skin. Protein in the flea saliva causes the allergy. Because of this, *only one* flea bite can cause the allergy. Dogs with flea allergies can be bit by a flea and still itch 7 days later. This is why your pet may have a severe allergy yet only have a small number of fleas. One flea is too many for a pet with a flea allergy. Cats get small pinpoint scabs on their skin, while dogs have itching and hair loss especially on their rumps and rear legs. Flea allergies tend to be worse in warm weather when more fleas are around.

*Food:* Pets can also be allergic to the food that they eat. Typically corn, beef, chicken, wheat and soy and dairy are the ingredients that cause the reactions. Pets with these allergies can have itchy skin all over their bodies, particularly, the armpits, groin and ears. Sometimes only one ear is affected. Along with the itchy skin, pets with food allergy sometimes have “sensitive stomachs” and may be more prone to vomiting or soft stools. Food allergies occur year round as the pet eats everyday.

*Inhaled allergens:* Just like in people, anything we can inhale and get “hay-fever” animals can inhale and get allergic skin disease. These inhaled allergens include pollens, molds, dust mites and even cat dander (in dogs) and tend to irritate the feet, face, and ears or all over the body. Like: “hay-fever” suffers, these pets may also have runny eyes and noses. Just as certain pollens and molds flourish at certain times of the year or different regions of the country, these problems can be seasonal or

geographic. However, some animals with dust mite allergies, for instance, may itch year round. Considering these points, our first goal is to try and identify what your pet is allergic to so the offending allergen can be avoided. It must be noted; however that determine exactly what the pet is allergic to may be difficult.

### **I think my pet may have a flea allergy. What should I do?**

The best way to treat the flea allergy is to avoid fleas. Since one flea can cause the reaction, flea control needs to be near perfect. Use Comfortis, Trifexis, Revolution or Vectra on your pet. Sentinel or over-the-counter products won't work for flea allergies as the fleas have to bite for these products to kill the fleas. We don't recommend bathing pet for 2 days before or after you apply the flea control. If this is not enough, you may have to treat the yard or possible fog the house to reduce flea numbers. Professional exterminators can be helpful. If fleas can be successfully eliminated, your pet's allergy could be resolved.

### **I think my pet may have a food allergy. What should I do?**

The best way to treat food allergy is to avoid the ingredients pets are commonly allergic to: corn, beef, chicken, wheat and soy. This is why lamb-and-rice food was used for dogs with allergies as lamb-and-rice food did not contain allergy causing ingredients. Nowadays, many lamb-and-rice foods contain corn, chicken, beef, wheat, or soy and rice themselves. We have to use more exotic foods that contain other protein sources such as fish, venison and even kangaroo meat! You may have to buy the special low allergy food through a veterinarian. Recently, pet food companies have developed foods that are processed in such a way that it is impossible for an animal to be allergic to them. Also realize that your pet can be exposed to allergic ingredients in treats, bones, rawhides, people food and even in flavored chewable medication (for example, heartworm tablets). To treat food allergies, your pet must eat low allergy food **and nothing else** for 4 to 5 months and see if he/she improves. If so, the food can be fed for the life of the pets and the allergy could be resolved. Baby carrots or special low allergy treats can be given and unflavored medication will have to be used for the life of the pet.

### **I think my pet may have an inhaled allergy. What should I do?**

In some way, inhaled allergies are the worst as it may be impossible to completely avoid grass pollen without moving to Arizona, and even the cleanest houses may have the dust mites. To determine what kind of inhaled allergen your pet may have, skin and blood test are available, just like people with allergies. Often, these test need to be done by a veterinary dermatologist. When your pet's inhaled allergen is determined, they can receive a series of weekly shots, just like an allergic child, to desensitize their system to the allergen. This can be a little costly and difficult for some as the shots are often given at home, but many pet owners are able to do this with good results.

### **I haven't been able to identify and successfully avoid what my pet is allergic to. What medications are used against allergies?**

*Antihistamines:* As in people, the first step in treating allergies is anti-histamines. These medications, such as Benadryl (generic name diphenhydramine HCL), are very safe and can be given to pets two to three times a day. The usual dosage for Benadryl is 1 mg per pound. For instance, a 25 pound dog would receive 25 mg or one capsule. Liquid medication (as for children) can be used for cats or small dogs. There are many different antihistamines available and certain antihistamines make work better for certain individuals. Antihistamines' main side effects are sleepiness and dry mouth.

*Fatty Acid Supplements:* Certain special short chain fatty acids can be added to the food everyday. These supplements slow the biochemical chain of events that cause itching in the skin.

*Topical Spray, Lotions, and Shampoos:* Although a little messy, cortisone or antihistamine creams or spray can be used on sports just as they are in rashes for people. Many shampoos with cortisone, aloe and oatmeal

exist and may also help with itchy skin. *Steroids*: All of the above remedies are quite safe and can be effective, but even when used properly may not be strong enough to control an animal's allergies. When the above remedies are not effective for allergies, we have to use steroid containing medications, like prednisone. These drugs may come in a tablet or injection and go by many names such as a "steroid shot," or "cortisone shot." Although these medications are quite effective and nearly always relieve itching, they can have more serious side effects, especially if overused.

### **What are the side effects of too many steroid shots or too much prednisone?**

Steroids are remarkably effective at calming the itch associated with allergies. They are used regularly in the veterinary practice and many pets cannot be relieved of their itching without these drugs. However problems can occur if an animal receives too much of the drug over too long a period of time. Steroids, like prednisone, because most pets to drink more and urinate more; dogs may feel hungrier pant more. Long term administration of steroids or high doses of steroids can cause a host of problems including delayed healing, a reduced ability to fight infection, hormonal imbalances, weakened ligaments, even diabetes and cataracts. Some of these problems can be quite serious. This is why when we use steroids, we try to do so cautiously and only after other treatments fail of it the pet's condition is severe. To prevent problems from steroid overuse, we may try to properly space out how often these medications are used or try other, safer treatments. Remember that our goal in treating allergies is to try to give your pet the greatest amount of comfort while doing the least amount of damage.

### **I've tried everything for my pets' allergies and still no improvement. What do we do next?**

Allergies are amount the most frustrating conditions to deal with. Whenever your pet is exposed to what he/she is allergic to, he/she will itch, unless medicated. For instance a dog with dust mite allergy may itch everyday unless he/she receives medicine everyday. In other words, medicine doesn't really cure allergies; medicines *manage* the itch and inflammation caused by allergies.

Sometimes allergy resolution is difficult if the pet suffers from other skin diseases that tend to occur along with allergies. The damage done to the skin by allergies and subsequent scratching can cause bacterial infection (treatment with long-term antibiotics) or yeast infections (treated with rigorous use of special shampoos). It is just as important to properly diagnosis and treats such conditions as well as the underlying allergy.

One reason a pet may not respond whose signs can mimic allergic skin disease. Mange and ringworm are examples of conditions that may cause itching and hair loss but respond to complete different therapies than allergic skin disease.

Lastly, some very complicated cases need expert help. Just as your general practitioner may refer you to a specialist if you have a severe or complicated illness, some pet's skin conditions need the expertise of a veterinary dermatologist.

As this handout demonstrates, allergies are complex conditions. Identifying what your pet is allergic to and finding the appropriate therapy can be challenging but it certainly worthwhile. Armed with the above information, and working with your veterinarian, it should be possible to relieve your pet's misery from allergies and hopefully minimize problems from over-the-counter medication.