

ITCHING AND ALLERGY IN DOGS & CATS

Coping with an itchy pet can be an extremely frustrating experience and can truly test the limits of the human-animal bond. Persistent scratching and chewing by your pet can also result in painful open wounds. The following information is intended to provide you with a basic understanding of the most common underlying causes of itching and allergies in your pet.

The Most Common Causes Of Chronic Itching

The common causes fall into two groups: external parasites and allergies. External parasites that most commonly cause chronic itching include fleas and sarcoptic mange. We often recommend testing for sarcoptic mange in chronically and severely itchy dogs. We *always* recommend superior flea control with veterinary recommended preventatives and monitoring for fleas, as flea infestation can really make allergy worse!

What Are Allergies?

Allergy is a state of *hypersensitivity* in which exposure to a harmless substance known as an *allergen* induces the body's immune system to "overreact". The incidence of allergies is increasing in both humans and their pets. People with allergies usually have "Hay Fever" (watery eyes, runny nose and sneezing) or asthma. While dogs can rarely also have respiratory allergies, more commonly they experience the effects of allergic hypersensitivities as skin problems. Though there are a variety of presentations, this can often be seen as redness and itching, recurring skin or ear infections, and hair loss.

What Are The Three Major Types Of Allergies In Dogs?

- 1. Flea Allergy** – Flea allergy is the most common skin disease in dogs and cats. For the flea allergic patient, 100% flea control is essential for the pet to remain symptom-free. "But doctor, I never see fleas on my pet." – You may not see them, but that does not mean they are not there. The allergy is caused by the flea's saliva, and it only takes a few bites to induce the problem. Also, the itchy pet often scratches so much that adult fleas are removed, making them hard to find. "If fleas are the problem, why is my pet still itchy in the winter?" – In warm climates like we have in Texas, fleas may survive in low numbers year-round. Because flea allergy is so common, we recommend that complete flea control be instituted before proceeding with diagnostics for other allergies and that year-round flea control be maintained for all allergy patients.
- 2. Food Allergy** – Some pets develop specific allergies to components of their diets. The allergen usually is a major protein or carbohydrate ingredient such as beef, chicken, pork, corn, wheat, or soy. Minor ingredients such as preservatives or dyes are also potential allergens. The diagnosis of food allergy requires that we test your pet by feeding special strict prescription diets for a period of 8 weeks. If the signs resolve, a challenge is performed by feeding the former diet and watching for a return of the itching. If this occurs, a diagnosis of food allergy is confirmed. Blood testing may also be used to diagnose food allergy depending on your pet's condition.
- 3. Atopic Dermatitis** – Atopic dermatitis (AD) is an inherited predisposition to develop skin problems from exposure to variety of commonplace and otherwise harmless substances including the *pollens* of weeds, grasses and trees, as well as *house dust mites* and *mold spores*. Diagnosis of AD is made based on the results of blood testing. Skin testing by a dermatologist can also be used to diagnose AD. Testing results help to compile a list of allergens for allergy injections that are made to decrease your pet's sensitivity. These injections can be given by you at home.

What About Skin And Ear Infections?

Allergies are often the underlying cause of recurring skin and/or ear infections. Bacterial and yeast infections, though secondary to the allergy, can cause an increase in your pet's level of itching. Long-term

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treatment with antibiotics and anti-yeast medications is commonly required, along with topical such as shampoos, wipes and ear cleaners.

Can Allergies Be Cured?

Unfortunately, there is no cure for allergies and it usually a life-long problem. We seek to *control* allergy and improve the quality of life for both you and your pet. We will formulate the best program of management that suits all involved with your pet's care.

Can I Treat The Itching Without The Expense Of Diagnostic Testing?

Symptomatic drug therapy can help to reduce itching. Steroids such as prednisone, are often employed to stop the itch. However, without addressing the underlying cause, the itching will return. Long-term use of steroids can result in many health problems. This is the reason that we encourage diagnosis of the underlying cause of the allergy and more specific or less potentially harmful treatments.