

# Allergies & Skin Disorders in Pets

The most common reason for skin problems in pets is an underlying allergy.

Allergies are one of the most common causes for recurrent ear infections in companion pets.

Skin disorders are extremely common in dogs and cats. The most common reason for skin problems in our pets is an underlying allergy. A veterinary exam is an important first step in eliminating other causes of itching, including fleas or infection.

If your veterinarian refers you to a dermatologist, it is because he or she sees a chronic or serious issue that is best dealt with by a specialist. Veterinary dermatologists have had specialty training for 2 to 3 years after veterinary school and have passed a certification exam given by the American College of Veterinary Dermatology.



## Allergy Testing

Allergy testing can help your veterinarian design an immunotherapy program. Allergy testing is done by a blood test or a skin test (intradermal allergy test, or IDAT). The IDAT is considered the "gold standard" in allergy testing. This test involves small injections of the most common allergens.

## Immunotherapy Treatment

Immunotherapy involves giving a pet injections of allergens in small, but increasing, quantities. The goal is to "retrain" the pet's immune system to be less reactive to those allergens and, therefore, prevent the symptoms of the allergy. Approximately 70% of dogs and 50-60% of cats respond to this treatment.

## Atopic Dermatitis/Atopy

Atopy, or inhalant allergy, is a hypersensitivity reaction to environmental allergens such as pollens, mold spores, dust and dust mites. The most common signs of this allergy are itching of the belly and "arm pits," face rubbing, foot licking, and recurrent ear and skin infections. Diagnosis is based on the pet's history of skin problems, lack of response to dietary restriction, lack of response to external parasite treatment, and results of allergy testing (skin and blood tests). Treatments for this life-long condition are medications such as antihistamines, steroids, cyclosporine and topical medications to minimize itching, or immunotherapy.

## Food Allergies & Food Trials

Just like people, pets can have food allergies. For dogs, the most common food allergens are beef, wheat, pork, corn, chicken, dairy products, and eggs. The most common sign of food allergy is year-round itching. Dogs with food allergies often rub their face or ears, lick their feet, and often "scoot" on their behind. Ear and skin infections are common. Cats often have intense scratching and crusting on the head and neck, and may lick the hair off their belly.

A period of diet restriction or a food trial is the **only** way to determine if a pet has a food allergy. The most important (and most difficult) part of a food trial is restricting what the pet eats to the trial diet only. This means eliminating **all** other treats, snacks, supplements, rawhide, pig ears, flavored chews, bones, and even flavored medications. Some pets improve in 2-3 weeks; some take 2-3 months. A minimum of 8 weeks on a restricted diet is recommended. Food allergies are a life-long condition; therefore, pets should continue to avoid eating the foods they are found to be allergic to.

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## Allergies

### *Things to know about pet allergies:*

- There is no cure for allergies
- Animals can be allergic to almost anything
- There are a variety of methods used to treat allergies

### *How dogs and cats show you that they have allergies:*

- Itching and scratching - red, inflamed or infected skin, i.e. Crusty/scabby
- Licking - Especially feet, face, and rear end
- Ear problems - Chronic infections, odorous/smelly inflamed ears.
- Occasional sneezing, nasal or eye discharge, or other respiratory problems

### *Things which animals are most commonly allergic to:*

- Fleas - allergic to saliva, secondary to being bitten
  - Inhalant allergies - ragweed, molds, airborne pollens, dust, etc.
  - Food - Different pets are allergic to different foods. Additionally, these allergies could take up to 2 years to develop.
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## Methods for treating allergies

### Antihistamines - Hydroxyine, chlorpheniramine, fatty acids, shampoos

Antihistamines in addition to fatty acid supplements (3V skin capsules) are a safe and fairly effective way to control allergies in dogs and cats. There are generally few side effects with this method of treatment, however, not all animals respond particularly well. Intensive medicated shampoo therapy can also be an effective component in treating the clinical signs associated with allergies (crust, inflamed skin, itchiness).

### Corticosteroids/Cortisone - Allergy shots or allergy pills, Cyclosporine

Cortisone is a commonly used method of treating allergies in cats and dogs. Cortisone pills and injections work extremely well in animals to eliminate the signs of allergies. However, there are many side effects to cortisone that can be undesirable and as a general rule; dogs and cats should not be on cortisone for an extended period of time. Dogs and cats tolerate cortisone well but the doses should be minimized to the least effective dose. Temaril-P, a cortisone/antihistamine combination, is often used and works very well with few side effects. Genesis topical spray (cortisone) also works well with no side effects reported. Cyclosporine is a new immunomodulating drug that shows tremendous promise when used with Ketoconazole and may eventually eliminate the use of corticosteroids altogether. Ketoconazole (antifungal) and various antibiotics are also used frequently to alleviate the common symptoms associated with allergic dermatitis. (I.e. Crusty, scabs, inflamed skin, itchiness, hair loss)

### Allergy testing

Allergy testing in pets is a simple blood test. The test results tell us which items to which your pets is hypersensitive. However, there are several 'catches' to this method. One, the testing is expensive. Two, your animal will have to get hypo sensitization shots on a regular basis. Three, just because you are giving your pet these shots does not mean that they will be off all other medications (I.e. cortisone, antihistamines). Finally, the hypo sensitization shots do not work for all pets.

### Food Trial - Royal Canin Hypoallergenic diets (please see ARF handout)

If your pet's allergies are non-seasonal, then there is a chance that your pet is allergic to some ingredient(s) in their food. The only effective way to diagnose and treat a food allergy is to feed a simple diet consisting of only one source of protein and starch. This special diet needs to be fed for 6-12 weeks. The key is to feed your pet this diet only; your pet should not consume any treats or human food during this trial.

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