

Allergies in dogs and cats

Different allergies and their symptoms, diagnosis and treatment

Allergens are categories into three main groups: flea bite hypersensitivity, food allergies and atopic dermatitis.

Flea bite hypersensitivity

A flea bite hypersensitivity is the most common type of allergy in dogs and cats. When fleas bite, the saliva which is injected into the skin is what dogs and cats get sensitised to. You can find out the signs and symptoms, diagnosis and treatment for a flea bite hypersensitivity below.

Symptoms: If a cat has a flea bite hypersensitivity, they over over-wash and groom themselves. Similarly, in dogs they scratch and nibble at the skin. Due to this, the skin will develop little red spots known as papules and specifically in cats, they are felt as widespread crusts which is referred to as miliary dermatitis.

Diagnosis: To diagnose a flea bite hypersensitivity, simple tests such as coat brushings, hair plucks and skin scrapes may be carried out. The samples will be taken away and viewed under a microscope. If other parasites are present, they will also be viewed.

Treatment: Your dermatologist will advise you to treat your pet regularly with a flea treatment (of which they will advise what product to use). Also, vacuuming your household carpets and washing any bedding your pet regularly sleeps on can help. For long term flea control the environment needs to be treated with an insecticidal product to interrupt the flea life cycle.

Food allergy

A food allergy can arise at any time, even if your pet has been eating the same food for months, even years. It is a reaction to a specific protein or food chemical in which the reaction manifests in the skin. The most likely food allergens contributing to food allergy in dogs are beef, dairy products, chicken, and wheat. The most common food allergens in cats are beef, fish and chicken.

Symptoms: If a cat has a food allergy, they will often scratch their head and neck but they can also overgroom elsewhere or have other manifestation such as the eosinophilic granuloma complex. Whereas, if a dog is considered to be itching more than “normal” and/or suffers from recurrent ear infections, they could potentially have a food allergy.

Diagnosis: The skin will need to be cleared from any infection and then a diet trial will be performed. This will include slowly stopping your pet’s ‘normal’ food and introducing food and a diet recommended by a specialist. The dermatologist specialist will choose an appropriate diet for your pet which will last in between 6 – 8 weeks. If a food allergy is present, you should notice a reduction in any symptoms your pet previously displayed. If the

elimination diet has been performed correctly but your pet did not improve, then your dog/cat is likely suffering from atopic dermatitis and reacting to environmental allergens.

Treatment: Following the elimination phase, challenge trials with specific foods will be conducted to identify the likely cause of food allergy. The treatment for a food allergy involves keeping your dog/ cat away from the food they are allergic to lifelong.

Atopic dermatitis

Atopic dermatitis is an allergic reaction to an environmental allergen which can either be seasonal or present all year round. Pollen is an example of a seasonal allergen, like hay fever in humans and dust mites in houses is an example of an allergen which appears all year round.

Symptoms: If the atopic dermatitis is seasonal, dogs and cats will only itch when the allergen is present (certain times of the year). But if it's all year around, the animal will constantly scratch their skin, lick and/ or chew their paws and rub their face.

Diagnosis: There are two tests which can be performed to help diagnose atopic dermatitis. The first test being an allergy blood test. This involves a blood test and blood sample being sent to an external laboratory to find out what your pet is allergic to. The second test is an allergy skin test. This involves your dog or cat being admitted into hospital for a few hours. Your pet will then be sedated, and a small square of hair will be clipped in order for injections of the allergen to be injected. The response is then monitored.

Treatment: If your pet is diagnosed with atopic dermatitis, they will require life-long management to control the condition as best as it can be. There are various treatment options available. These include:

- Anti-itch medication
- Immunotherapy
- Antibacterial/ antifungal shampoo, foams, wipes and pads
- Antihistamines
- Essential fatty acids (EFAs) added to your pet's diet
- Products to help to improve skin barrier function

The dermatologist will go through the different types of treatment with you and discuss the best method for your pet.