



Allergies in Pets

What are allergies?

An allergic reaction is one in which an individual over-reacts to a normal substance in the environment. These substances are called allergens and include, pollens, molds, animal hair, house dust, fleas, foods and many more. For a pet to be allergic to something, there must be **PRIOR EXPOSURE**. You or your pet cannot be allergic to something the first time they encounter it.

Allergens cause reactions through skin contact, inhalation or ingestion. Allergic animals possess IgE antibodies to specific allergens. These antibodies cause biochemical changes in the body which produce signs of allergy. In humans we usually see runny eyes, sneezing and a runny nose. Cats will often show respiratory signs (usually coughing) but dogs will usually show intense itching. If the allergy is to pollen, you might see most of the symptoms in the spring or summer, but if the allergy is to indoor substances such as house dust or mites, or foods, you are more likely to see year round problems.

How can I have my pet's allergies diagnosed?

A physical examination and history can lead to a strong suspicion of allergies but it cannot determine what your pet is allergic to. Consequently, treatment options are limited to drugs alone. Tests are available and include:

- Skin testing – for environmental allergens only
- Food trials – for food allergies only
- Blood testing – can check for food or environmental allergens

Skin Testing

This test, performed by a Dermatology Specialist requires shaving the entire side of the pet, multiple scratches, and application of a series of potential allergens. It is considered to be the most sensitive of tests but is moderately expensive, and tests for environmental allergens only; it cannot detect food allergies. In addition, you pet must be off treatment for two weeks before testing.

Food Trial

While simple in concept, this test involves feeding your pet protein sources that he or she has NEVER HAD BEFORE. Usually we use a combination of beans and potatoes which is a diet poor in nutrition but new commercial hydrolyzed diets can be used for the trial. NO OTHER FOODS CAN BE FED including table food, treats or even some medications that include beef flavoring, etc. This test takes time – it requires minimum of six to twelve weeks to complete and you cannot use medications while performing the food trial since it would not be possible to tell which was helping – the food or drugs.

Blood Testing

Great advancements have been made in this area in recent years. One blood sample can detect environmental and food allergens. The testing is customized to be specific to our region. It is not necessary to withdraw medication before testing and it does not require referral to a specialist. In fact, we can have the results before you could even get in to see a specialist.



There are several testing options available:

- Regional inhalant profile
 - Detects sensitivity to 31 regional grasses, trees and shrubs
- Indoor panel
 - Detects sensitivity to molds, insects such as fleas and flies, epidermals such as human skin and dog and cat hair, cloth and rug fibers, smoke, and house dust, (37 things in all)
- Food screen
 - Detects sensitivity to all common pet food ingredients

How can I treat my pet's allergies?

Drugs have long been our most common treatment option. However side effects are common. The most common drugs used are Antihistamines and Steroids (not the body building kind) but new drugs . Desensitization or "Allergy shots" are also available.

Drugs

- Antihistamines
 - Must be given two to three times a day
 - Make pets drowsy (like us)
 - Often ineffective. Especially with food allergies
- Atopica
 - Atopica is a special formulation of Cyclosporin that has been shown to be very effective in reducing the itching and inflammation caused by allergies.
 - It is an excellent choice for dogs with inhalant skin allergies and it has few side effects making it a better choice than steroids for most cases
- Steroids
 - Many side effects, some severe
 - Ineffective for most food allergies
- Desensitization
 - Can only be done after blood or skin testing
 - Requires you to give shots (which really isn't that hard)
 - Starts out daily but decreases to once monthly in about 3 months
 - Minimal side effects
 - Eliminates or greatly reduces the need for drug therapy
 - Is a chance for complete cure – No more shots, no more drugs!!

Food allergies and avoidance

The only way to treat food allergies is to avoid foods containing ingredients the pet allergic to. Since most commercial pet foods contain many similar ingredients, simply trying a new food usually won't work because the potential allergens are not limited enough. Most food trials involve feeding a combination of beans and potatoes. Food trials last a minimum of 4 to 12 weeks and medications cannot be used during the trial since it would be impossible to distinguish a response to the food change from a response to the medication. Unfortunately, food trials just tell us that the allergy is NOT against beans and potatoes. So,



after a long, successful, food trial, a commercial diet must be found by trial and error. Blood testing detects sensitivity to specific things and a list of commercial foods is provided that will aid in selecting the right diet. Blood testing usually provides options – a welcome thing if your pet is finicky about food.

So what do we recommend?

- A physical examination and accurate history are important for customizing a diagnostic workup and treatment plan. Other potential causes of itching should be ruled out before working up an allergy case.
- When inhalant or seasonal allergies are suspected, a trial treatment with Atopica will usually demonstrate a sufficient response and treatment is simply continued.
- When it becomes necessary to understand what specific allergens are causing the problem, we recommend a combination of testing and case specific treatment. We generally recommend using the Comprehensive blood panel:
 - It is easier than a food trial
 - It provides better information than a food trial
 - Tests for 92 common allergens including region specific plants
 - Treatment options can then be customized based on the information provided.

For more information about allergies or the testing we offer, visit www.vetallergy.com