

Allergies in Dogs (Allergic skin Disease)

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Allergies, and in particular allergic skin diseases, are one of the most common conditions seen in domestic animals. They can also be one of the most difficult to treat and one of the most frustrating for all concerned. They are caused by an over reaction of the immune system in response to contact with foreign particles. This heightened immune response is also called an **hypersensitivity**.

There are at least five known types of allergies in the dog. These are:

- -contact
- -flea
- -food
- -bacterial
- -inhalant (atopy)

You may first notice that your dog has an allergy at an early age. This may be noticed by watching the dog groom excessively with licking and chewing at the paws, abdomen and perineum. This is the first indication that your dog suffers from itchiness (pruritis). In the early stages you may seek veterinary help for a number of minor skin complaints, including spots, ear problems and scratching. It may only become apparent later that these episodes are related and you do in fact have an allergic dog.

The coat and skin may be relatively normal initially but as the disease progresses then you may start to see changes in the skin including baldness (alopecia), redness, darkening and secondary infections with yeast and bacteria. Saliva staining is another tell tale sign that your dog has been chewing areas of pruritis, especially around the paws.

It is quite difficult to identify which allergen is responsible for each individual allergy. However one of the most common causes in the UK is flea allergy.

Flea allergic dermatitis

Many dogs and cats can become hypersensitive to proteins in [flea](#) saliva. When a flea bites this causes a reaction which results in itch. For an allergic animal this pruritis can be very severe. Once sensitised, an animal may only need one flea bite to set off a huge reaction. Even if fleas haven't been seen then it doesn't mean they are not responsible. Any animal showing signs of allergic skin disease must have a rigorous flea regime put into place especially since animals with allergies to other things are often also allergic to fleas.

With flea allergies, the rump and hind end are most commonly affected. Nibbling and scratching can give the skin and coat a very rough feel. Severe cases can develop alopecia with reddening of the skin, this can go on to form dermatitis.

Food sensitivity

Food allergy has historically been regarded as an uncommon cause of skin disease in dogs although some literature would suggest that cases are on the increase. If flea treatment hasn't been successful in alleviating the signs then a food trial may be attempted next. This involves feeding a new protein to the animal for a month or more to see if the symptoms of allergic skin disease are reduced. If there is an improvement then the next stage would be to feed the old diet again and see if the signs of allergy return. A positive diagnosis of food allergy could then be made.

Bacterial skin disease

Skin infection can often cause signs of itchiness. Bacteria can complicate dermatitis and damage the integrity of skin. Other conditions can also reduce the skins defences and allow bacterial infection to take place, e.g mange, hypothyroidism.

Intra-dermal skin tests

Dermatologists often perform these tests to identify specifically which allergen is responsible. The tests involve clipping an area of skin and injecting particles of allergen to see if there are any reactions. Any injection site which has a larger than normal reaction can identify the particular allergen which is causing the problem.

Once the allergen has been identified, a vaccine can be made to try and desensitise the animal to the allergen, this can take many months to take effect and is not successful in all cases.

If an allergen has been identified then you should minimise contact between your animal and the allergen. For example, if the tests have identified a *house dust mite* as the allergen then you would be wise to keep the animal out of bedrooms. However, avoidance isn't always practical, especially if the allergen is in the air, such as a pollen.

Treatment

Animals with allergic skin disease often have secondary bacterial and yeast infections which complicate the situation and make the animal more itchy. These organisms are often present in normal healthy skin without causing any problems but as soon as the skin's defences are compromised then they take advantage.

Initial treatment therefore will be aimed at eliminating these infections and special shampoos or antibiotics may be needed for a few weeks.

Essential fatty acids are sometimes used in cases of allergic skin disease. They can improve the general health of skin and help a number of animals significantly.

There are no veterinary antihistamines on the market, however a variety of human ones can be used in animals. The use of essential fatty acids and antihistamines together can make both treatments more effective.

Steroids are often the drug of choice for allergic skin problems. They do have side effects but these can often be justified when the alternative is an unhappy itchy animal. The dose of steroids can be adjusted according to the severity of the skin problem at the time.

Hyposensitising vaccines can be used as treatment in an attempt to desensitise the animal to allergens which have been identified in the intradermal skin test. These vaccines are not always successful and can take up to nine months to take effect.