

Allergic Skin Disease - A Holistic Approach

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Allergies are the bane of many animal and human lives, and the signs, although variable depending on species, cause misery in a variety of ways. Atopy is a common allergy to pollens, grasses, house molds, and a host of other allergens, and can affect both dogs and cats. These allergens can be inhaled, ingested, or sometimes absorbed through the skin; the resultant hypersensitivity causes a variety of clinical signs that are attributable to itchiness (pruritis). These signs may appear in the spring or fall, or even year round, and, like human allergies, cannot be cured--only controlled.

Atopy is usually inherited, and pets begin to show signs between six months and eight years of age. The most commonly affected breeds are terriers, Golden and Labrador retrievers, Schnauzers, Poodles, Lhasa Apso, Shih Tzu, and Shar Pei. You may see your dog exhibiting foot licking, face rubbing, leg chewing, armpit scratching, head shaking, tail biting, discharges from the eyes or nose, and even post nasal drip (which is sometimes described as wheezing, snorting or trouble breathing). Related problems may include skin and ear infections and anal gland problems. Cats usually have small crusty lesions over part or all of the body, usually around the neck or over the back (Scott, et al, 1995).

Your pet's treatment may vary according to the severity of the problem. The easiest, least expensive control measure is to switch your pet's diet to a good quality natural food. Grocery store and even some premium brands may be composed of poor quality ingredients and contain preservatives, dyes, antibiotics (Markus, et al, 1989), and other chemicals that may contribute to overall ill-health or even be a source of allergic sensitivity in some animals (Parke and Lewis, 1992). If one can improve overall health of the animal (and, therefore, of the skin), allergies and fleas will not usually cause such violent skin reactions.

Conventional veterinary recommendations for the treatment of atopy usually include fatty acid supplements, hypoallergenic shampoos and topical treatments (preferably oatmeal based), antihistamines, skin testing and allergy shots, and as a last resort, steroids. Allergy shots (or hyposensitization treatment) are effective approximately 50-80% of the time (Scott, et al, 1995). Different antihistamines are usually tried until the one that best controls the itching is found. Topical medications can be used to soothe hot spots and ear infections. Antibiotics and antifungals are used to control secondary bacterial and *Malassezia* (yeast) infections.

Holistic alternatives to these treatments will not only increase the health of the pet, but allow you to use fewer conventional drugs. In addition to a superior natural diet, some nutritional supplements may prove helpful. A basic veterinary vitamin-mineral supplement is a must, to start with. High doses of Vitamin C may have an antihistamine-like effect (Johnston, et al, 1992). Some veterinarians have found a combination of antioxidant elements to be helpful; these include B-carotene (or Vitamin A, in the case of a cat), Vitamin E, and selenium. Other antioxidants, such as quercetin, are used in human allergies. An n-3/n-6 fatty acid supplement is vital. Look for fish oil as well as evening primrose, borage, flax, safflower, or sunflower oils.

Herbal treatments may be helpful as a tonification strategy, but rarely provide immediate relief from itching. Chinese herbs should be prescribed according to Traditional Chinese Medical principles (Bensky and Gamble, 1993). Western herbs that are occasionally helpful might include yellow dock, burdock, nettles, cleavers, and various tonics as well as specific antimicrobial and immunostimulant herbs, depending on the presence of concurrent infections. Calendula may help relieve irritated hot spots (Weiss, 1994; Tyler, 1994; Moore, 1994).

Other treatments that may be indicated for skin allergies include homeopathy, acupuncture, glandular therapies, and more.

Managing allergies requires acute powers of observation. When people feel allergies coming on, they start treatment with antihistamines well before they become extremely uncomfortable or have already developed a raging sinus infection. You must be your pet's "watchdog"--treatment should begin with the onset of the most subtle signs of itchiness; for example, when a dog just begins to lick the feet. Diligent preventive treatment at this point can ensure that your pet will not develop the serious secondary problems like skin and ear infections. It is vital to work with a holistic veterinarian in administering alternative therapies to ensure that your pet is getting correct dosages and the treatment that is most appropriate for him or her