

Food Allergies in Pets

There are several types of allergies in pets. The three most common are flea allergy, inhalant allergy, and food allergy. Food allergies are fairly common in pets, and are caused by a hypersensitivity to certain proteins in food. Humans typically react to allergens with nasal symptoms, dogs react with skin problems. Whether the animal suffers from only one type of allergy or a combination, the signs are generally the same. Dermatologic symptoms are scratching, biting, licking, chewing at feet, and reddened skin. Flea and inhalant allergies commonly have dermatologic symptoms, and animals with allergies to flea bites can often experience severe hair loss from as little as one flea bite. Animals with food allergies commonly show dermatologic symptoms but can also experience gastrointestinal (GI) problems such as vomiting and diarrhea as well as acne on the face, wheezing and runny nose. It is also very common for animals with food allergies to get reoccurring ear infections.

Any food protein, consumed over time can cause a food allergy or sensitivity. Allergens are large protein substances; typically, the larger the protein, the greater the allergic response. In the body, antibodies are made by the immune system to proteins that are recognized as foreign. In an allergic animal, the whole immune system is oversensitive and the body responds in an extreme way to substances that it perceives as foreign invaders. Allergies can be inherited, so some pets are genetically predisposed to become allergic to certain proteins over time. What a pet eats for years can suddenly cause an allergic reaction, or it can be a food that the pet has eaten only for a short time.

Veterinarians estimate 10-15% of itchy skin disease in pets may be caused by food allergies, and up to 30% of nonseasonal dermatitis.

The allergen or antigen, the substance that creates the response, enters the animal's body via the lining of the GI tract. The symptoms of an allergic reaction can begin to develop immediately or up to an hour after ingestion of the allergen. Although any food substance can create allergy, certain food proteins are more likely than others to cause a reaction.

Wheat (gluten) protein seems to top the list of allergens, but also beef, soy, corn and cow's milk regularly produce allergy in pets.

In addition, artificial preservatives, colors and flavors are totally unnecessary (and often toxic) ingredients that are in many commercial pet foods and they can often be the cause of itchy skin problems. Sometimes simply putting a pet on a holistic diet can make the symptoms abate. Holistic pet foods do not contain meat by-products, artificial preservatives, flavors, colors or fillers like whole grain corn, peanut shells and soybean shells. Holistic foods typically use natural preservatives, such as Vitamin E (often listed as mixed tocopherols). Since the majority of commercial pet foods contain such a large number of ingredients it is often difficult to know which ingredient is causing the itching.

Therefore, the key to diagnosing, and treating food allergies is by following an "elimination diet." This diet requires the pet owner to choose a diet containing a single protein source that is new to the pet, and limiting the number of ingredients the animal is exposed to over a period of 8 to 12 weeks. Since the animal has never been exposed to the proteins in the new food, the food will not create an allergic reaction, and the conditions are able to start improving.

For example, many grocery store brand dog foods contain chicken and corn, so the elimination diet may be as simple as switching to a lamb and rice diet, or it may need to be something more novel such as fish and sweet potato. Many pet food companies have a simple food formula that consists of a single protein and one carbohydrate. When choosing a food, read the label carefully to be sure it is strictly one protein and one carbohydrate. A food might be labeled Lamb & Rice "formula" but it still could contain corn and chicken.

Examples of elimination diets are; lamb and rice; duck and potato; fish and sweet potato; venison and brown rice.

The elimination period should last 8 to 12 weeks - although often improvements are seen as soon as one week. The very most important thing to remember during this period is NO table scraps, treats, biscuits, rawhide, supplements, chewable medications (unless medications are vital - ask your vet if meds can be discontinued for 30 days), chewies, rawhide - **NOTHING**, until the problem is resolved. (Unless the treats consist of the same protein and carbohydrate combination as the food.)

All treats including chewing treats must consist of the same single protein/single carbohydrate as the food for the elimination diet to be effective.

Elimination Diet

When a pet owner notices their pet has itchy skin, chronic ear infections and/or diarrhea and vomiting, and suspects a food allergy these are the steps to try to solve the problem:

1. Rule out other causes of skin problems such as ringworm, sarcoptic mange or flea bite dermatitis.
2. Prepare a careful dietary history for the pet. Include any foods the pet has ever eaten including treats and table scraps.
3. Choose a new diet that contains a single protein source that is new to the pet. Feed an elimination diet for 8 to 12 weeks. Be sure to only use treats that are compatible.
4. If the itching clears, usually food is the culprit. To confirm food allergy, return to the original food; if itching resumes, food allergy was truly the reason for the itchy skin.
5. Return to the elimination diet. When symptoms begin to improve add back a new protein ingredient one at a time to determine the culprit.
6. Once any food allergy ingredients are determined, feed the pet a new diet devoid of the allergens.

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When the symptoms clear, return to the original food; if itching resumes, food allergy was truly the reason for the itchy skin. (If itching is not resolved while strictly adhering to the elimination diet, then the animal has some other condition than food allergies.)

Once an owner determines a food is the problem, the question becomes what is the animal allergic (or sensitive) to? To help determine exactly what protein(s) the pet is allergic to the owner can begin adding back a former ingredient, roughly one each week, and watch for allergy symptoms to return. If symptoms return after the addition of an ingredient, it can be concluded that that ingredient is the cause of food allergy for the pet. Once the food allergy ingredient is determined, the pet must remain on a diet devoid of that ingredient. Many people do not want to take a chance of returning to itching if the pet is doing well; there is no reason not to simply stay with the elimination diet if the pet remains free of symptoms. In the future the pet may become allergic to another protein. In that case, this process must be repeated. Tests can also be run to determine precisely which proteins cause an allergic response; however, they can be expensive and the dog will still need to consume an elimination diet prior to testing.

At this time, there is no cure for food allergy. Veterinarians will often give the pet an "allergy shot." These shots are steroids and they can have many unpleasant short- and long-term side effects, not to mention food allergies do not consistently respond as well as the other allergy types to these allergy shots. Many people are led to believe they are a cure, instead of a short-term treatment option while determining the exact cause of the problem. Steroids can be easily abused because they are so good at controlling inflammation and making the pet feel better quickly that it is easy to get into the habit of getting a monthly allergy shot.

The only effective treatment for food allergy consists of avoidance diets, where the allergic animal avoids any and all forms of the food to which they are allergic, usually for the rest of their lives.

Also, new research shows that giving omega-3 fatty acids orally has been found to be helpful in treating the symptoms of allergies. Omega-3 fatty acids or essential fatty acids (EFA) are nutrients that are contained in fish oils, sunflower oil and flaxseeds. Basically, they work by helping to reduce the immune response and the chemicals released when confronted by foreign invaders and allergens. Fatty acid therapy does not work for all pets, but some animals will show a remarkable improvement. The only drawback of fatty acid therapy is that it often takes several weeks before results can be seen. Many pet owners find their pet's allergies clear up when they change their pet's food to a premium holistic food, and this can in part be due to the incorporation of greater amounts of essential fatty acids in these foods.

At 15 years of age, we determined that Zeetlegoo our Abyssinian cat had corn allergies. Her switch to a corn-free food and the quest to find such a food in Southport prompted the establishment of Zeetlegoo's Pet & People Store in 2004. Zeetlegoo's carries a full line of holistic allergy formula foods and treats for dogs and cats and holistic small animal and bird foods.

We carry on Zeetlegoo's Mission, and help other dogs and cats find their way to an allergy-free life.