



Allergies

Just like people, dogs can suffer from allergies. Allergies arise when a normally harmless substance is seen as a threat and the immune system responds inappropriately resulting in an allergic reaction.

Allergies in dogs can be due to things in the environment (including fleas) or food. Symptoms may include scratching, licking, head shaking, sore ears, crusts, hair loss, ulcers and interdigital furunculosis (cysts). Occasionally there are also gastrointestinal symptoms including vomit, diarrhoea and flatulence.

Food Allergies

Food allergies in dogs can present at any age, with the most prevalent age group being less than 6 months. The most common foods responsible are poultry and beef. Food allergies can be managed by changing your dog's food but first a food allergy has to be diagnosed.

Food allergy testing is available but is often inaccurate so the best way to determine if your dog's symptoms are due to a food allergy is to do a food trial. This involves feeding a hydrolysed diet for 6-8 weeks. No other treats should be fed during this time, the only thing your dog should eat is the hydrolysed food. Suitable hydrolysed foods include Purina HA, Royal Canin anallergenic and Hills ZD. There is also the option to do a home cooked food trial with a novel protein source and carbohydrate if feeding a hydrolysed food isn't an option.

If the original allergy symptoms disappear after the 8-week trial then we can assume a food allergy is present. During the food trial we often start some form of allergy treatment as we don't want your dog to be uncomfortable during this process. Once the food trial is coming to an end we will then withdraw the allergy medication and see if the skin symptoms return (indicating a food allergy isn't present) or remain absent (indicating it is). In an ideal world we would reintroduce the original food and if the symptoms return that would confirm a food allergy, although this isn't always feasible!

Environmental Allergies

Atopic dermatitis(allergies) is a common condition in dogs. The most common environmental allergies are to house dust mites, pollens and grasses. The majority of dogs are allergic to more than one thing, each contributing to the symptoms we see. Exposure to a single allergen may be insufficient to cause dermatitis, however the effect of small amounts of multiple allergens can add together and cause dermatitis. We can perform an allergy test to try and identify what your dog is allergic to and use the results to reduce exposure to these allergens and if appropriate formulate immunotherapy. Although we can usually manage allergies, it is a lifelong condition with no guaranteed 'cure'.

Management is achieved by

- 1) Controlling exposure to allergens.
- 2) Therapy to control the immune reaction and therefore itch and inflammation.
- 3) Therapy to control secondary bacteria, yeast and flea prevention.

Controlling Exposure to Allergens

Completely avoiding exposure to substances your pet is allergic to, other than food, is almost impossible. However, reducing the exposure to certain allergens in the environment is possible and by doing so we can reduce the degree of dermatitis and in turn the amount of medication required.

- As dust mites are the most common cause of allergies in the UK, avoidance where possible is key. When vacuuming and dusting keep your dog outside, or remove them from the room. If possible, your dog should be kept in an un-carpeted room and not in your own bed- as your bed often has the highest concentration of

dust mites in the home! Wash the dogs bedding weekly. A dehumidifier also reduces the amount of house dust mites.

- Storage mites are also a known allergen, they feed on flour, grains and seeds. Management of your dog's food can help reduce exposure. Empty the food from its original package and store in a resealable plastic container and discard the dust at the bottom of the packet. Keep the food in dry/cool conditions.
- Don't allow your dog to lie on freshly cut grass if a grass allergy is suspected. It may be worthwhile looking at your dog's skin before and after contact with grass to determine whether the condition is affected by contact with grass. Wash your dog's paws after a walk. Avoid cut flowers indoors.

These management options may not control the symptoms alone however they should reduce the amount of control therapy required.

Therapy to control the immune reaction, itch and inflammation

- Immunotherapy- This involves identifying what your pet is allergic to by either an intradermal test, which is the test of choice, or a blood test. A specific vaccine containing what your pet is allergic to is then made. It works by gradually building up immunity/tolerance to the specific allergens that are causing the allergic reaction. With this option you aren't just treating the itch, you are treating the root cause of the problem. Immunotherapy is very safe and is effective in up to 80% of cases. If the therapy works then immunotherapy injections are usually, but not always, lifelong. For further information see the immunotherapy information sheet.
- Cytopoint (lokivetmab)- A monoclonal antibody. An injection given every 4-8 weeks to control the itch associated with allergies. The data suggests this drug is very safe.
- Apoquel (oclacitinib)- Works to reduce the itch and inflammation associated with allergies. Side effects appear to be minimal but may include reducing white blood cells.
- Steroids- Very effective in controlling allergic dermatitis however they have potential side effects when used long term. The side effects are reduced when given on an every other day or every third day basis. We can also use topical steroids on both the skin and ear.
- Atopica (cyclosporine)- Modifies the component of the immune system involved in the development of allergies. It is relatively safe over a long period of time but expensive. The main side effects are vomiting, diarrhoea and gingival hyperplasia.
- Antihistamines- those available are not licensed in veterinary species and only have a beneficial effect on a very small number of dogs.
- Essential fatty acids dietary supplement- They come in liquid or capsule form and are used to improve the outer barrier of the skin and coat quality, which is thought to be faulty in dogs with allergic dermatitis.

Often a combination of treatments is required to control the itch and secondary infections.

Therapy to control secondary bacteria, yeast and flea prevention

Infection may be present in dogs with allergies. This is in part due to the changes in the skin structure caused by the disease. Secondary infection itself leads to itchy skin. It is important to treat any infections that may be present, alongside treating the allergy itself. Treatment includes specific wipes, shampoos, foams, creams and occasionally tablets. Sometimes some form of topical treatment is required long term.

Many patients will develop an allergic reaction to flea bites. It is important to have a good flea control program. There are numerous products available for this, the isoxazolines (Bravecto, Nexgard, Simparica) are a good choice. In recent years we have seen resistance to a large number of flea products that you find in the supermarket.

Beware of the Flare!

In dogs with allergies we can expect flare ups from time to time, perfect control is rare. Think of the 80:80 rule, we aim to manage 80% of your dogs symptoms 80% of the time. Causes of flare ups can include infection, pollen count, change in medication, exposure to a new allergen, stolen food and the time of year.