

Environmental Allergies and Your Pet

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What are environmental allergies?

If your pet is always at the vet dealing with skin infections and itchiness, environmental allergies are a possible underlying cause. Instead of the respiratory signs we think of in allergic people, most pets display their allergies by becoming extremely itchy. A pet with environmental allergies may have itchy red ears, inflamed lips, and itchy feet (front especially). They often have chronic ear and skin infections that may respond well to medications that suppress the immune system like steroids.

Often, pets are itchy only during their particular “seasons,” with the most common being late summer and fall. However, depending on the allergen, your pet may be itchy any time of year. Keep in mind some allergens are present indoors (such as dust mites, mold spores, etc), so his allergies may actually get worse in the winter when the windows are shut and ventilation is decreased. Pets of any age can be affected, although environmental allergies are most commonly seen in younger animals.

Keep in mind that many different causes may be making your pet itchy. Sometimes yeast and bacteria can cause itchiness in and of themselves, so the vet may treat infection and assess itch response prior to diagnosing a patient with an environmental allergy. Other causes of itch include fleas, mange, and food allergies. It is important to consider all these issues, and keep in mind that your pet could even have multiple allergies at the same time.

How are environmental allergies diagnosed?

Methods for diagnosing allergies include serum allergy testing (SAT), intradermal skin testing (usually done by a veterinary dermatologist), and response to treatment. Diagnosis of environmental allergies can be tricky. Often, we never conclusively prove a patient has an environmental allergy. If they are itchy during certain seasons and respond well to appropriate medications, however, that is often all the proof we need.

SAT is done by sending blood from your pet to a laboratory that will analyze the sample to identify potential allergens, as measured by his immune response. This often generates a very long list of triggers that may include different types of pollen, insect dander, dust mites, mold spores, and even skin cells of other pets or people. The lab can use these results to generate a series of vaccines that are designed to desensitize your pet to his potential allergic triggers. This is usually quite safe, with the first injection being given at the vet’s office to make sure that your pet doesn’t have an adverse reaction to it. After this, you may learn how to give the injections yourself under the pet’s skin, or have a technician at our office do it for you.

Keep in mind that many pets may not have a dramatic response to the allergy injections, and may still require other medications, such as steroids, to control their symptoms. It does

take time, often up to 6-12 months, to take effect. SAT is also fairly expensive, so make sure you discuss the pros and cons of this with your vet.

The gold standard for diagnosis of allergies is intradermal skin testing. This is done with a veterinary dermatologist, and is similar to what is done in people. Your pet will likely need to come off his meds well in advance of this procedure, and his skin should not be inflamed. A large patch of skin will be shaved with a grid drawn on the skin. A small amount of many different types of allergens are injected under the skin, and the inflammatory response measured. Since this is done by a specialist, it can get pricey, but is a good option for owners who want to get a solid answer on what is causing their pet's itchiness. From the results, the dermatologist will make further recommendations such as allergy avoidance, medications, or generating injections to desensitize your pet similar to those outlined above.

How are environmental allergies treated?

Another option for diagnosing allergies isn't really a diagnosis at all, but response to treatment. Most patients have dramatic response to medications that suppress the immune system, such as steroids. It is also important to treat any secondary infections (bacteria and/or yeast) that have resulted from the patient itching itself excessively.

Steroids are great at relieving the itch very quickly, and are generally fairly safe when given for a short amount of time. Most pet owners will notice their pets eat, drink, and urinate more while on steroids. When given too long and/or at higher doses, steroids can cause other problems, including weakening body organs, diabetes, Cushings disease, and making patients more prone to infections such as UTI's and respiratory bugs.

In the last few years a revolutionary new drug called Apoquel has become available to treat itch. It has a complicated mechanism of action, but basically works to block the itch receptors of the skin. It is given orally at a loading dose (twice a day) for two weeks, and if it's working well, is decreased to a maintenance dose (once a day) as long as needed. It's generally a safe drug, but has some mild suppression of the immune system, and may make pets more prone to developing certain tumors that are usually benign. Because of these side effects your vet will likely recommend labwork if your dog is to be on Apoquel long-term. There is a similar medication called Cytopoint that's given as an injection that generally lasts for about four weeks. It is more targeted to the itch receptors and has less of the other side effects, so is safer. It is also more expensive, especially for larger dogs.

Over-the-counter options for treating allergies

Omega-3 fatty acids are also helpful in decreasing inflammation in the skin. These are available over the counter, and are generally safe and well-tolerated in our patients. Keep in mind that fatty acids need time (generally six weeks or more) to build up in your pet's system to see positive effects. Some vets recommend feeding a fish-based diet, as well, as fish is naturally high in fatty acids.

Antihistamines may also help, but only in about ¼ of our allergic patients when given as the sole medication. They seem to work better when given early, i.e. prior to when the patient becomes itchy. They also seem to be more effective when given at the same time as fatty acids. Antihistamines are safer than steroids and less expensive than cyclosporine, so may still be worth trying in your pet. Cats seem to respond better than dogs to antihistamines, so this is a consideration, as well. There are also many kinds of antihistamines available, and if one does not work for your pet, another might. Ask your vet for recommendations!

Bathing your pet regularly (possibly with a prescription shampoo) is also helpful in treating superficial infections, and decreasing the load of allergens, bacteria and yeast that may have built up on your pet's skin.

In Summary

The goal in treating any disease is to identify and address the cause, if possible. Allergies are often frustrating to treat because this may prove to be very difficult. Hopefully your pet can be managed with safer treatments such as fatty acids, shampoo, antihistamines, and possibly the occasional course of steroids. Cyclosporine is a safer option for long-term use if your pet's troubles are year-round or if he has an underlying condition that makes steroid usage risky. If you know your pet's allergy season, intervene early so the treatment is less intense. Consider allergy testing, either blood or intradermal, to identify the underlying cause and generate vaccines to desensitize your pet. Just keep in mind this may be expensive and it may take several months to see a positive response.