

Food Allergies and Your Pet

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What is a food allergy?

If you find yourself bringing your pet to the vet frequently for recurrent skin and/or ear infections that flare up after medications are stopped, a food allergy is a potential underlying cause. In cats and dogs, food allergies often cause chronic itchiness (which can often lead to rashes and skin infections), as well as chronic ear infections. In dogs, itchiness is concentrated on the face/head, feet/limbs, and belly. In cats, often just the head and neck are itchy.

A food allergy is almost always caused by a protein in your pet's food, such as beef, chicken, or pork. Rarely, other allergens can be the culprit, such as soy, dairy, or grain. Keep in mind that pets are often on the same food for a long time before they become allergic to it. A food allergy can present at any time in a pet's life, including as a puppy/kitten. Often the pet is itchy year-round, and many drugs such as steroids or antihistamines do little to help with the itch.

How is a food allergy diagnosed?

This is the tricky part! ANYTHING that passes through your pet's lips can be a potential trigger of a food allergy. This includes his food, any treats or table scraps he might eat, medications including heartworm pills, and anything else he might sneak from the garbage, litter box, compost pile, or elsewhere. There are blood tests available for diagnosing food allergies, but they are very unreliable. The gold standard for diagnosing a food allergy is to do a STRICT diet trial.

Keep in mind that it is important to rule out other causes of itchiness, as well. These include fleas, environmental allergies, and mange. Your pet may even be itchy from multiple allergies. Your vet will likely want to perform diagnostics and initiate treatments on your pet either prior to or at the start of the food trial, including examining skin samples under the microscope, checking for mites, treating secondary infections.

The basic principle behind a food trial is feeding a hypoallergenic diet for a set period of time, usually at least 2-3 months. There are two basic options in choosing a hypoallergenic diet: one option is to choose a food with a protein and carbohydrate source your pet's body has never seen (novel protein diet). With this type of diet, make sure you look at ALL INGREDIENTS of ALL PRODUCTS your pet eats, as listed above. Find a protein and carb source that he has never had any exposure to. Examples of this type of novel proteins include rabbit, venison, kangaroo, or buffalo.

A second option is a diet made with proteins broken down into such tiny particles his body does not recognize them as foreign (hydrolyzed diet). We often start patients on hydrolyzed diets since they don't require research into past food exposure.

Ideally, you should choose a prescription diet, since what is on the label is guaranteed to be on the bag. This is not always the case for over the counter diets, as expensive as they might be! You need to make sure that the whole family and visitors to the house, pet sitters/walkers, etc. can commit

to the food trial. It is very important your pet gets ONLY his special diet. This means no edible toys, rawhides, bones, table scraps, or other treats that do not contain the novel protein and carb source. We can recommend flea/tick/heartworm prevention and other necessary medications that are in a non-flavored tablet form, or types that bypass the GI tract completely so as to not interfere with the food trial.

Other treatment options

In the last few years a revolutionary new drug called Apoquel has become available. It is important to recognize that it does nothing to treat the underlying food allergy, but does treat the itch which is usually the most significant consequence of the allergy. 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.

What happens next?

We may recommend rechecking your pet a month into the diet trial to make sure he is less itchy, recheck his skin/ears, and to find out how things are going at home. Try to get a sense of how itchy he is, and whether it is improving as he starts his diet trial. Try to use a scoring system to quantify your pet's itch before and during the diet trial, where a 0/10 is not itchy at all, and a 10/10 is itching nonstop.

If the diet trial is successful (remember, you have to commit to at least 2-3 months to know for sure whether it's helping!), there are options moving forward. One is to feed the special diet forever. This may be expensive, and will limit his treat, medication, and toy options moving forward. Another approach is to re-introduce protein sources, one at a time, and keep track of whether your pet becomes itchy again. Generally it takes 2 weeks, at the most, to know if this is occurring.

While on this special food, your pet should only be getting better. If he has a relapse, it might mean that he snuck something other than his special diet, or it might not be the right diet for him. Keep in mind that your pet will not outgrow his food allergy: it is something that will have to be managed for life. Please do not hesitate to call us if you are concerned or have further questions. Luckily, once you find the right diet, your pet will live a more comfortable, itch-free life.