

SKIN ALLERGIES IN DOGS AND CATS

Skin allergies are very common in both dogs and cats and can be a cause of great distress for both the animal and their owner. This article looks at the most common cause of skin allergies in dogs and cats.



ATOPY

What is it? Atopic dermatitis is an inappropriate immune response to environmental substances that results in inflammation of the skin. Several allergens can be responsible for triggering atopy including grass pollens, house dust mites and storage mites, and yeasts.

Who gets it? Any dog can be affected by atopic dermatitis, but there is a genetic predisposition in certain breeds such as terriers and retrievers. Allergies tend to develop in middle aged dogs, from 1-3 years of age.

Clinical signs – The primary sign is itching – especially of the ears, axillae (armpits), groin and limbs. Reddening of the skin and rashes occur due to the inflammatory process. Self-excoriation (scratching, biting and rubbing) damage the skin's protective barrier, leading to hair loss and secondary bacterial or yeast infections.

Diagnosis – Atopy is a diagnosis of exclusion, and involves identifying and treating any other potential underlying factors such as external parasites. There is no specific test for atopic dermatitis, but both blood tests and intradermal skin tests can be performed to identify likely allergy triggers. There will often be more than one allergic trigger.

Treatment – Where possible, exposure to the allergen should be reduced. The mainstay of treatment is symptomatic to reduce the itch. This involves the use of immunomodulatory drugs and sometimes antibiotics to treat secondary infection. In addition, shampoos and oral supplements containing Omega-3 fatty acids can be given to improve skin and hair health, and reduce inflammation.



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FOOD ALLERGY DERMATITIS

What is it? Food allergy is relatively uncommon, affecting around 10% of allergic dogs.

Who gets it? Any dog can be affected, but there is a genetic predisposition in breeds such as German Shepherd dogs. Allergies tend to develop in middle aged dogs.

Clinical signs – Signs are similar to those of atopy, with generalised itching and the development of rashes and secondary infections. The face or perineal region may be more commonly affected. There may also be gastrointestinal symptoms, such as vomiting or diarrhoea.

Diagnosis – This involves a diet trial, exclusively feeding a single source, novel protein and carbohydrate diet for 6-12 weeks. If the symptoms subside during this period, and no additional treatment is required other than the diet change, this indicates the likely source was dietary. However, the only way to confirm which allergen a dog is reacting to is to perform a challenge test, with reintroducing protein and carbohydrate sources one by one until an allergic response is triggered. This step is often avoided once a suitable diet is found, to reduce the risk of skin flare up.

Treatment – Once diagnosed, the treatment is to simply avoid the allergen in the diet. However, allergies can continue to develop over time to new allergens and the process may have to be repeated.

FLEA ALLERGY DERMATITIS

What is it? This is the most common cause of skin disease in cats.

Who gets it? Middle aged to older cats are most prone to developing allergies. Any breed of cat may develop an allergy.

Clinical signs – The most common presentation is military dermatitis, which means lots of small scabs across the cat's body. These tend to be most concentrated around the neck and rump. Often, there is hair loss and scabbing. Cats may be seen to groom excessively. Flea dirt is often found, however, because this is a true allergy it may only take one or two flea bites to cause an allergic reaction and evidence of fleas may be lacking.

Diagnosis – A wet paper test will usually show presence of flea dirt in the coat; coat brushings placed onto wet paper show red spots dissolving (these are the flea droppings). Even in the absence of obvious flea dirt, this is a diagnosis of exclusion with regular treatment for fleas recommended for all pets in the household. The house itself may need to be treated to remove the reservoir of flea eggs and larvae in soft furnishings.

Treatment – Allergic cats will usually require immunomodulatory treatment to stop the itch, plus treatment may be needed for secondary skin infections. Once the skin is healthier and flea populations have been controlled, regular flea treatment may be all that is required to prevent flare ups. Oral supplements containing omega-3 fatty acids can help to support skin and hair health.

Omnicutis is a complete skin support supplement, with high levels of Omega-3 fatty acids, plus zinc and herbal extracts which help to modulate the immune response and support natural skin health.



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