

Allergies and Your Pet

Hair loss, itching, foot licking, redness and inflammation leading to skin and ear infections are all signs noted in a pet with allergies. Typically pets with allergies can be allergic to many substances in their environment. Dietary components (especially proteins and carbohydrates), plant pollens, house dust, mold spores, and carpet fibers can all cause allergic reactions. An allergic reaction represents the body's immune system over reacting to these substances. To confirm a diagnosis of skin allergies, your veterinarian will want to perform certain diagnostic procedures to rule-out other disease processes including flea or mite infestation, ringworm (fungal) or bacterial infection, and behavioral licking/chewing. The only way a specific allergy can be identified is through allergen testing. There are methods we can use to attempt to eliminate some of these allergens or methods we can use to help the animal's body deal with the inflammation. The treatment of your pet's allergies is an attempt to control the problem. A lifelong cure is rarely possible. Often we need to combine two or more therapies to make your pet as comfortable as possible.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

1.) Hypoallergenic Diet: Occasionally your pet's food may be to blame for their allergies. The only way to know for sure is to conduct a hypoallergenic diet trial, which involves feeding a prescription diet for six to eight weeks. During this time your pet may not receive anything to eat other than its prescription diet – no treats, no chewable medication, no human food. Currently there are two different types of prescription diets to consider with respect to allergies. One involves feeding proteins and carbohydrates that your pet has not likely been exposed to (for example, duck and potato or fish and potato). The other option is to feed food containing hydrolyzed protein. Hydrolyzed proteins are proteins that have been broken into such small pieces that they can no longer stimulate an allergic reaction. Keep in mind that there is no one hypoallergenic diet that will work in every situation.

2.) Fatty Acid Supplements: Fatty acid supplements will not only help replace necessary oils in a correct mix to a stressed coat, but they will also help decrease itching by decreasing inflammatory pathways in the body. These supplements come in tablet, capsule, granule, or oil form and can be purchased over the counter or from us. It can take six to eight weeks for fatty acid supplements to improve your pet's coat.

3.) Antihistamines: Antihistamines relieve inflammation by stopping histamine release within the body. These drugs will not stop allergies if your pet is having an acute itching or hot spot reaction. However, if given on a regular basis, they will often help control itching so that more severe reactions are less likely to occur. There are several antihistamines used to treat allergies in pets. While none is more powerful or effective, some will work better than others in specific animals. We recommend that a pet be started on a two-week trial antihistamine therapy. If it works well, we will continue. If not, we will try a different antihistamine. Antihistamines are generally very safe. The most common side effects we see are lethargy and dry mouth, although vomiting, diarrhea, and loss of appetite are possible.

4.) Antibiotics: Pets with allergies often develop skin infections as a result of the normal bacteria on their skin taking advantage of the skin's unbalanced immune system. It is very important to control the infection, typically with systemic antibiotics. Controlling infection alone will often make a big difference in your pet's comfort level.

5.) Regular Bathing: This is perhaps the most important and most overlooked thing we can do to keep our pets comfortable. Bathing should be done every few days to weeks as needed. Medicated shampoos and conditioners are available to help reduce skin inflammation and itching. Antiseptic shampoos may be necessary if your pet has a skin infection. When bathing your pet you need to: 1.) use warm water, 2.) work the shampoo into the coat thoroughly with your fingers, 3.) allow the shampoo to stay on for at least five minutes, and 4.) rinse well with warm water.

6.) Cyclosporine (Atopica ®): This is a fairly new allergy treatment option which specifically targets the immune cells involved in the allergic reaction. Given orally cyclosporine is designed to reduce the symptoms of allergies without the unwanted systemic side effects of steroids. The most common side effects of oral cyclosporine therapy include vomiting and diarrhea. This medication is quite expensive and may be cost-prohibitive, especially for larger pets.

7.) Steroids: Often the treatments listed above just aren't enough to make an allergic pet comfortable. In these situations, we may elect to use steroids to stop the inflammation. Steroids are very powerful drugs and should be used only when necessary. Steroids may be given on a short or long term basis, either by injection (Depo-Medrol, Vetalog), orally (Prednisone, Methylprednisolone), or topically (Genesis spray). Common side effects seen with steroids include increased thirst, urination, appetite, and panting.

8.) Thyroid supplementation: Low thyroid levels are often found in pets with allergies and can be directly associated with poor coat quality and inflammation. Hypothyroid (low thyroid level) pets (usually dogs) are often overweight even when fed a low calorie diet, have low energy levels, have a poor, dry, flaky, patchy hair coat, and often seek warm places to lay. Confirmation of hypothyroidism is accomplished with a simple blood test. If your pet is hypothyroid it can be medicated safely, easily, and relatively inexpensively with daily lifelong thyroid supplements. By readjusting the thyroid hormone level we can help decrease skin inflammation as well as improve other metabolic factors such as weight control.

9.) Hyposensitization: Hyposensitization or allergy injections are designed to help your pet develop greater tolerance towards those substances that are causing irritation. Allergy injections dramatically improve the condition of approximately 60% of animals, make some difference in another 20%, and are ineffective in 20%. This treatment is usually reserved for animals that are irritated all year long. Your pet's allergy injections will be tailored specifically for him or her based on the results of allergen testing. Allergen testing can be done using blood or intradermal skin testing. Each test method has its advantages and disadvantages and these can be discussed with your veterinarian.

PLEASE REMEMBER.....

Allergies are a lifelong problem that usually progresses over time. What started as a mild spring itch often progresses to year round hot spots and inflammation. While we will not be able to cure your pet's allergies, we can help you learn methods to control your pet's allergies. While allergies are under control, many secondary problems such as ear infections, anal gland infections, and hot spots will also become much easier to control or resolve.

If you have any questions regarding any of the above information, please do not hesitate to contact us. Visit us online at www.WhiteBearAnimalHospital.com.

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