



Allergies

The topic of allergies is a BIG one in veterinary medicine. An allergy is defined as a hypersensitivity to a trigger or allergen particle. Allergens are everywhere and beyond measurable in number. Generally speaking, there are 3 categories of allergies: food, environmental (a.k.a. atopy), and flea.

In a nutshell, allergies incite inflammation, which lead to itch and increase the risk for infection and disruption of the normal healthy flora in the skin and gastrointestinal tract. Allergy problems can significantly impact comfort and quality of life.

When to suspect allergies in your pet

Food and environmental allergies are often associated with itchiness, poor haircoat quality and skin health. Infections of the skin, ears, eyes, and paws are typical. Gastrointestinal issues are also common with both types of allergies as environmental allergens are often ingested. Inconsistent appetite, nausea, vomiting, soft stool or diarrhea, and pancreatitis can occur.

Environmental allergies can also be associated with inflammation of sinuses, nasal passages and asthma/bronchitis and increase risk of respiratory tract infections.

Flea allergies create intense itch, diffuse scabbing and poor coat quality. It is important to note that a single flea can trigger an allergic reaction in these hypersensitive patients.

Diagnostics

Environmental allergies can be tested for with a blood or skin test. Tests for environmental allergies typically include allergen categories for geographically pertinent trees, grasses, pollens, dander, and mold.

Food allergy tests are also available, though their reliability is debatable. They may help identify strong reactions to common diet ingredients. A food trial entailing 8-12 weeks of a *strict* novel protein, limited ingredient or hypoallergenic diet is the standard recommendation as they can also provide both supportive evidence and treatment for food allergies. No other food or treat items should be fed.

Keep in mind, there are limitations to current available allergy tests as there are countless allergens in the universe.

Flea allergies can be tested for as well, however, a safe, reputable and routinely utilized flea preventative is almost always effective and recommended in order to prevent other flea-borne infections.

Treatment



For environmental allergies, there are several types of supplements and medications that can be used to manage allergic inflammation and prevent secondary infections and discomfort. High quality supplements to help maintain skin/coat and gastrointestinal health are useful and include omega supplements (such as Welactin or Dermaquin) and probiotics. Over-the-counter antihistamines can be beneficial for some patients.

Prescription allergy-targeted medications, such as Apoquel or Cytopoint and other medications of similar class can provide great relief. These medications target the inflammatory pathway involved in allergy-triggered inflammation. Other immune-modulating medications such as Atopica can also be effective. Sometimes a steroid medication is indicated to reduce severe inflammation. Customized immunotherapy or allergy desensitization therapy based on allergy test results can be another treatment. Immunotherapy can take 6-12 months to effect. It is important to keep in mind that hypersensitivity to allergens can change over time, so re-testing annually is recommended for immunotherapy (as well as for food allergies). A combination of the above supplements and medications may be used as appropriate.

Food allergy management typically involves strict diet regulation. Prescription hypoallergenic diets are usually the cornerstone of treatment. Diet may also be customized based on allergy test results. Steroid medications are also often needed to control inflammation. Probiotics and fiber supplements can help maintain gastrointestinal health.

Flea allergies are best addressed by implementation of regular use of a flea/tick preventative product.

Note that allergies can flare up with fluctuations in the presence of allergens and level of exposure. Seasonality, climate, immune health and overall health status all play a role in an individual's susceptibility to allergies and secondary infections.