

# ORAH Info:

## Allergies in Dogs and Cats



In allergy, an animal's immune system "overreacts" when exposed to a substance in the pet's environment, such as pollen in the air or the food the pet eats. These substances are called "allergens". Allergic symptoms show up in three different ways, but the first is by far the most common:

- Itching of the skin, either in one area (a patch of skin, a paw, the ears) or generalized (all over the animal). Cats often have hair loss with normal-appearing skin, while dogs may have variable hair loss accompanied by skin redness, ooziness, or sores.
- Respiratory problems, including coughing, sneezing, wheezing, and sometimes discharge from the nose or eyes.
- Digestive system upset, resulting in vomiting or diarrhea.

### CAUSES

There are five causes of allergies in pets: inhalant (airborne), flea, food, contact, and bacterial. In addition, some animals are allergic to more than one thing.

Allergies tend to be present lifelong, and in many cases they require ongoing attention. Generally, allergies can be managed but not eradicated. Low thyroid levels can also worsen allergy symptoms in dogs. Your vet may recommend thyroid testing and supplementation.

### INHALANT ALLERGY

The most common type of allergy in dogs and cats (and the most common cause of itching) is to something they inhale. Pets can be allergic to all of the same inhaled allergens that affect humans. These include tree pollens, grass pollens, weed pollens, molds, mildew, and common house dust mites. Many of these allergies occur seasonally, while others seem to be year-round. When humans inhale these allergens, we get "hay fever" – a respiratory problem. A pet's reaction usually produces itchy skin or ears, but they occasionally have respiratory symptoms.

Most pets that have inhalant allergy react to more than one allergen. If there are only a few and they are the seasonal type, the symptoms may only last for a few weeks and only during one or two times of the year. But if a pet reacts to a number of allergens, or if they are present year-round, the animal may itch constantly. Testing for inhalant allergies involves sending out a blood sample to a special laboratory.

Treatment for inhalant allergies depends largely on the length of the pet's allergy season, and may involve several approaches:

- Eliminating exposure to the antigen. This is ideal, but often difficult to achieve. Some changes can be made to the environment to reduce the overall antigen load, for example, keeping a mold-allergic pet out of damp areas in the home, such as the basement and bath rooms.
- Medication. Treatment with medications can dramatically block an allergic reaction. This is a non-specific approach, which does not treat the underlying allergy, only the symptoms. Options include oral or injectable steroids, antihistamines, immune modulators, and omega-3 fatty acid dietary supplements. When some of these are combined, many allergic pets improve significantly. Generally, steroids are only used briefly and intermittently, but immune modulators, antihistamines and fatty acid supplements are often used long-term. Using them can often reduce the frequency and severity of symptoms enough to help us use less steroids overall.

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- Hyposensitization. Also known as “allergy shots”, injections that contain very small amounts of specific allergens can reprogram the body’s immune system. As time passes, the immune system will often react much less to problem-causing allergens. For most dogs, a realistic goal is for the itching to be significantly reduced. In some cases, itching may completely resolve.

Allergy testing / hyposensitization can be an ideal way to treat inhalant allergy, since it avoids medication side effects. There are certain things to consider when making this decision:



**Cost.** This can seem like an expensive form of treatment, but if helpful it may actually cost less than repeated rounds of medications.

**Age of the patient.** Many pets develop additional allergies as they get older, so younger ones may need to be retested after 1-3 years.

**Success rate.** About 50% of pets will have an excellent response. About 25% get partial to good response. About 25% get little or no response.

**Time of response.** It can take 2-5 months or even up to a year to see any improvement.

**Interference of steroids.** Steroids must be discontinued for a significant period of time prior to testing, because these drugs interfere with test results.

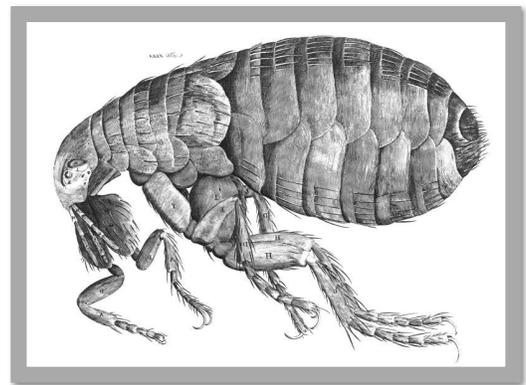
## FLEA ALLERGY

Flea allergy is very common. Most pets encounter fleas in the environment fairly often. While a normal animal may have mild or modest irritation in response to flea bites, the flea-allergic animal has quite a severe reaction. Just one flea bite can cause such intense itching that the pet may scratch or chew itself to the point of hair loss and open sores or scabs. A secondary bacterial infection is often the result.

It can be hard to believe that fleas are the cause of allergy symptoms, since many flea-allergic animals have no visible fleas or flea dirt. This is because they may be grooming themselves vigorously, removing the evidence, or because it only takes a very minor exposure to fleas to cause major symptoms.

The most important and effective treatment for flea allergy is to protect the pet from all fleas by rigorous use of topical flea products. Steroids and antihistamines can be used to temporarily block the allergic reaction and relieve itching, and antibiotics are sometimes necessary to control secondary bacterial infections.

All dogs and cats with allergies should be protected against fleas, particularly during flea season. Even if they are not specifically allergic to fleas, the itching created by flea bites can worsen their response to other allergies.



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## FOOD ALLERGY

Dogs and cats are not born with food allergies. They develop allergies to food products they have eaten for a long time. Common allergens include beef, chicken, dairy, soy, wheat, or corn. In cats, fish is a common allergen; this is not the case for dogs, since most dog foods do not contain fish.

An animal with food allergy may experience itching or digestive problems. It can be challenging to identify food as the source of the allergic reaction, since other allergies also cause these symptoms. And once food is identified as the likely culprit, finding out exactly which ingredient is the problem requires patience and persistence. Although a blood test for food allergy is available, it is unreliable. A food trial remains the best diagnostic test for food allergy.



We recommend a food trial when symptoms have been present for several months (indicating that this is not a one-time or short-term problem), or a non-seasonal (year-round) pattern of symptoms is observed.

The trial is done by feeding a special limited-antigen diet and closely watching for changes. The pet must eat the special diet exclusively for 8-12 weeks or more. This means no table food, no treats, no vitamins – otherwise you will waste both time and money and it will not be a meaningful test. If the allergic signs go away on the special diet, we can then carefully reintroduce other foods and look for any reaction.

Since many allergic dogs and cats (some studies say around 70%) react to more than one type of allergen, we may also try a food trial with pets who have seasonal symptoms, in an effort to reduce the total overall allergen exposure.

## CONTACT ALLERGY

Contact allergy is the least common type of allergy in pets. It results in a local reaction of the skin – there will be skin irritation and itching at the points of contact (hence the name). Examples of contact allergy include reactions to flea collars or to types of bedding such as wool. Removing the contact irritant solves the problem – however, identifying it sometimes requires a lot of work.

Many pets are helped considerably by frequent bathing with a hypoallergenic shampoo. Since some allergens are absorbed through the skin, frequent bathing is thought to reduce the amount of exposure. In addition to removing surface allergens, bathing with soothing shampoos provides some temporary relief from itching.

## BACTERIAL ALLERGY

Bacterial allergy is usually found only in dogs. There are many species of Staphylococcus bacteria that live on normal dog skin. If the skin is normal and the dog's immune system is normal, these types of Staph cause no problems to the host. However, dogs with any type of allergy often have overgrowths of these bacteria. When these dogs have skin infections, they develop red bumps or areas of hair loss with red, oozing skin. These lesions show a dramatic response to antibiotics, but in an allergic dog, the problem returns as soon as antibiotics are stopped. In dogs with Staph allergy, their lesions are usually worse than dogs with other types of allergy. They also tend to have an even more dramatic response to antibiotic treatment. Treatment of a Staph allergy involves using antibiotics to control the immediate problem and desensitization treatments for long-term relief. In some cases, long-term low dose antibiotics are necessary.

## PROGNOSIS

Most dogs with allergies require life-long management. As they age, their allergy symptoms may change and they may become allergic to more things. Keeping track of your dog's symptoms and response to treatment, and working with your vet's recommendations, can help your pet be happier and more comfortable in the long run.

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