

Wessex Veterinary Orthopaedics

Independent Veterinary Referral Service for
Orthopaedics, Spinal Surgery & Dermatology

Allergic skin disease

Dogs and cats can be allergic to one or more different things. Allergens fall into three main groups. Within each group, your pet may be allergic to something very specific, but there is often some overlap between the different groups. This means your pet may be allergic to things from one or all of the three main groups.

Flea allergy

Your pet may develop an allergic reaction to flea saliva, which is injected into the skin each time a flea bites. This is the most common type of allergy in dogs and cats. In cats, flea allergy typically causes overgrooming, while in dogs it causes scratching and nibbling. In dogs, the skin develops little red spots (papules) frequently concentrated around the lower back, tail base and hind limbs (known as the “flea triangle”). In cats, these can be seen and felt as widespread crusts (known as “miliary dermatitis”).

Food allergy

Food allergies can develop even when pets have eaten the same food for months to years. A food allergy is a reaction to a particular protein or food chemical that shows up on the skin. Common proteins that cats and dogs are allergic to include chicken, fish, gluten and egg. Cats with a food allergy generally scratch their head and neck, but dogs that are itchier than “normal” may have a food allergy.

Atopic dermatitis

Atopic dermatitis occurs when an allergic reaction to an environmental allergen occurs, comparable to hay fever or asthma in humans. The environmental allergen may be seasonal, for example pollen, or be present all year round, for example house dust mites. With seasonal atopic dermatitis, cats and dogs only itch when the allergen is abundant, for example, grass pollen in spring and summer. Pets with atopic dermatitis may scratch their body, lick and chew their paws and rub their face.

Diagnosis of Skin Allergies

To find out what your pet is allergic to, we follow a step-by-step approach to rule out different causes. The approach starts with a detailed history of your pet, including parasite control, diet, and other factors. We will then perform a general physical exam and lastly focus on the skin and any areas of special concern.

Fleas and other skin parasites

To rule out skin parasites such as fleas and mites, we perform simple tests, including coat brushings, hair plucks, and skin scrapes. We examine these samples under the microscope for evidence of parasitic infestation. In some cases, further testing is required, and samples will need to be sent to an external laboratory. For example, testing for mange often involves taking a blood sample.

The next step is to diagnose and treat any existing skin infections. Dogs and cats with allergies are highly susceptible



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to secondary bacterial and/or fungal infections. Skin infections can also be very itchy in their own right and therefore complicate the diagnostic approach.

Food allergy

Once the skin is free of infection, a dietary trial may be performed. A dietary trial involves gradually stopping your pet's current food and introducing a hypoallergenic diet that is most appropriate for your pet. The dietary trial needs to last for up to eight weeks. If your pet has a food allergy, you should notice improvement by about six weeks, including an overall reduction in itching. If food allergy is the presumed diagnosis, once the trial is complete, your pet should be challenged with their original diet. If this causes the itching to return, the diagnosis of food allergy is confirmed.

Atopic dermatitis

We diagnose atopic dermatitis by ruling out parasites, secondary infections, and food allergy. It can be very difficult to identify exactly what your pet is allergic to in the environment and to minimise exposure physically. Allergy testing is usually only performed in young to middle-aged cats and dogs and when owners are interested in immunotherapy as a form of treatment (see below). The test involves a routine blood sample sent to an external laboratory. The blood is tested against an extensive profile of allergens such as house dust mites, grass pollens and tree pollens.

Treatment of Skin Allergies

Your pet may have more than one type of allergy, and in those cases, treatment should address all of the underlying causes. Even with appropriate treatment, occasional flare-ups are common, during which time your pet may itch more, and the skin may appear red. Contact your veterinary surgeon for advice if your pet has a flare-up. Unfortunately, many skin allergies require lifelong management. Successful treatment requires owner commitment and ongoing collaboration with your veterinary surgeon.

Flea allergy

Cats and dogs with flea allergy are treated and managed with regular flea treatment. Most of the flea life cycle happens in the environment, so vacuuming carpets and washing bedding can help eliminate immature stages. We usually also recommend a household spray.

Food allergy

If a diagnosis of food allergy is confirmed, then the treatment is pretty straightforward and involves avoidance of the food(s) your pet is allergic to. Hypoallergenic prescription diets are nutritionally complete and can be fed long term. However, if your pet was fed a home-cooked diet as part of its trial, you may be referred to a nutritionist to make sure the diet is sufficient in micronutrients.



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Atopic Dermatitis

Atopic dermatitis usually requires lifelong management with medication. The management is usually multimodal, meaning it includes different therapies given in various ways. The different therapies are:

- **Anti-itch medication** This medication comes in the form of tablets, capsules, liquid and injection. We will discuss with you all the various options and select the most appropriate medication for you and your pet. Anti-itch medication aims to treat your pet for as long as necessary, then taper to the lowest possible dose to keep your pet comfortable. In rare cases, it may even be possible to stop treatment.
- **Immunotherapy** Immunotherapy can be started after allergy blood testing. A type of vaccine is made containing the allergens your pet is most allergic to. Your pet will receive regular injections of the immunotherapy vaccine. Theoretically, immunotherapy desensitises your pet to the allergens it is allergic to, so when it encounters these environmental allergens in day-to-day life, it does not react. This therapy takes six to eight months to take full effect, so your pet may need anti-itch medication initially. Immunotherapy is not effective in every cat and dog and may be discontinued if there is no improvement after 12 months.
- **Antibacterial/antifungal shampoos, foams, wipes and pads** Cats and dogs with atopic dermatitis have an abnormal skin barrier and, as a result, the normal micro-organisms that live on the skin can take advantage and overgrow or cause infection. Therefore, to keep numbers under control, we may recommend a shampooing regimen.
- **Antihistamines** Antihistamines may be given to enhance the effect of concurrent medication and/or to reduce the allergic reaction in the skin. There is limited evidence for their use.
- **Essential fatty acids (EFAs)** EFAs are thought to improve skin barrier function, and there is no contraindication to giving them. They can either be added to the diet or fed as a component of specific prescription diets. Again, there is limited evidence for their use.

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