

What You Need to Know about Pet Allergies



Questions & Answers

What is allergy?

Allergy is a disease in which the immune system reacts abnormally to everyday substances such as pollens, animal danders, mold spores, mites, and certain foods. All of these allergic reactions are unpleasant, some are serious, and a few can be fatal. The offensive substances causing allergies are known as allergens. An allergic reaction may be caused by inhaling or ingesting the allergen, but most often is the result of direct contact of the allergen with the pet's skin.

What are the signs of allergy?

The most common clinical sign of allergy in dogs and cats is itchy skin, which can lead to:

- Scratching, biting, and chewing at the skin
- Excessive face rubbing
- Excessive grooming
- Hair loss
- Recurrent ear infections

The usual locations of the itching are the belly, feet, base of tail, and face, especially around the eyes, mouth, and ears. Less commonly observed signs include sneezing, coughing, and asthma.

How do I know if my pet has allergies?

Not all scratching is due to allergies. Allergy diagnosis requires that the veterinarian first eliminate all other possible causes of the itching. Infection by fleas or lice, bacterial or fungal infections, or just dry skin may explain the itching. These problems are usually easy to resolve. Allergy is different. Your veterinarian will want to take a complete history of your pet's problems, perform a complete physical examination and may do some preliminary laboratory tests. The veterinarian may recommend a special diet and a food trial to eliminate

food allergy as a cause for the allergic signs. When other causes of your pet's itching are eliminated, your veterinarian may arrive at the diagnosis of allergy.

How does my pet get allergies?

Your pet inherited its ability to become allergic from its parents. After continued exposure to the offending allergens for months or years, the signs of allergy become apparent in the pet. The typical allergic pet starts with a short period of biting, chewing and scratching which may be mild or perhaps unnoticeable. With repeated exposure to the offending allergens, the pet gradually experiences prolonged periods of itching and changes in the texture and color of the skin. In most animals, the initial signs of allergy appear during the first 2 to 4 years of life.

How are allergies treated?

There are a number of different ways or combinations of ways to treat allergies. If the allergy is mild, avoidance of the offending allergens in conjunction with environmental control may be all that is needed to control the disease. Your pet's veterinarian may also prescribe medications such as steroids, antihistamines or a special food to control the clinical signs. In pets with more severe allergies, or in pets where allergies occur year-round, specific allergy treatments such as immunotherapy (allergy shots or drops) may be needed. Immunotherapy is often recommended because prolonged use of certain medications (especially steroids) to reduce itch may also produce serious side effects, potentially decreasing the quality and length of your pet's life. Your pet's veterinarian will discuss various alternative treatments with you based on your needs and the needs of your pet.