



Scratching the Surface of Allergies

Middle of the night, sounds come up from below the floor, jangling, metallic, annoyingly loud and persistent. Poltergeist? A burglar? No, just Sally the Shepherd scratching uncontrollably, rabies tag and ID causing all the noise, as pollen counts keep climbing. Sally, like so many of our pets (and us), suffers the discomfort of chronic allergies, causing her (and her “parents”) to suffer through yet another sleepless night, with little relief in sight without another trip to the vet.

Unlike their human counterparts, dogs and cats do not seem to have as many respiratory signs when they encounter things they are allergic to. This is because of the location of receptors for the chemical mediator called *histamine*. Pets tend to have many more receptors in their skin. When histamine is released by the body through a complex series of events under the masterful control of our immune system, reactions are caused by its attachment to these receptors. Therefore, whether it is from the food they eat, the air they breathe, or the things they come in contact with, exposure to allergens usually makes your pet itch, sometimes quite severely.

Also unlike their owners, pets do not tend to respond as well to *antihistamines* (so that’s why they are called that!!), though the fact that they have so few side effects (and dogs and cats don’t drive heavy machinery) makes them worth a try in certain cases. In fact, when symptoms are severe, cortisone is the only thing that will work, although it is preferable to only use it when absolutely necessary.

To understand allergies and hope for relief, there are a few things that need to be mentioned:

- One can only be allergic to something they have already been exposed to. I frequently have people tell me that “he’s been sleeping on that rug for several years,” or “that’s all she’s ever eaten,” to which my response is always “exactly.”
- The best means of controlling allergies is *avoidance*. While this seems obvious, it is not always easy. When it is the wall-to-wall carpeting making Micia scratch, avoidance might prove to be costly.
- Determining what your pet is allergic to might prove to be either difficult, costly, or both, though in the long run, especially when treatment is possible, less costly than repeat office visits for chronic allergies

The four major types of allergies in dogs and cats are the following: inhaled (known as atopy), contact, food, and arthropod. The latter is a doctor’s way of saying fleas. Of the four, this is the one that nowadays should never be seen by us, as modern flea and tick prevention products are so effective that even a forgetful person ought to have flea free pets.

Food allergies can be quite challenging, especially since every major pet food manufacturer started making lamb based diets. There was a time when that was the universal hypoallergenic diet, because NO pet food contained lamb. There are several manufacturers, though, that make “unique protein” diets based on all kinds of things that are not usually in pet foods: venison, duck, oats, fish, etc. And one well-known manufacturer actually designed a food where the size of the protein molecule is so small, the immune system doesn’t “see” it.

A veterinarian can usually determine if food allergy is a likely source of the pet’s discomfort. One little trick, though, is “ears and rears.” Chronic recurring ear infections in dogs who do not swim or get bathed regularly, or dogs who have constant problems with anal glands or lick their rear ends frequently.

Contact allergies are often diagnosed by the pattern of inflammation or lesions it creates. For instance grass allergies often show up as saliva staining on all four feet from licking. Rug allergies often are on the hairless underbelly of dogs and cats. This type of allergy, if the causative agent can be identified, may best respond to avoidance. In my experience, antihistamines do not work particularly well with contact allergic dermatitis.

Allergic inhalant dermatitis can be caused by anything airborne. Anything. That is why it can be so challenging to improve the quality of life of the pet without either allergy “shots” or cortisone. Typical atopy involves grasses, tree pollens, fungi, molds, and common weeds. Like “hayfever” in people, they are worst during different seasons. Most allergic dogs tend to be allergic to something during every season but winter, however, and often need year round control.

An interesting thing about allergies, I find, is the “threshold” concept. The more things you are allergic to that you have exposure to, the greater the chances of symptoms. Therefore, sometimes eliminating *some* things may bring relief even if continued exposure to others remains. That is why I am a huge fan of comprehensive allergy testing for the severely afflicted pets; there is a blood test screen that covers most of the inhaled, contact, and food allergens, and it is regionally adjusted. Once everything the pet is allergic to is known, a good game plan can be designed specifically for the individual, whether it is eliminating things from the environment, changing the diet, or giving allergy shots.

One last thought. Not all scratching is due to allergies. And sometimes allergic dermatitis is complicated by bacterial infection. Furthermore, in a small group of dogs and cats, the allergy is actually *caused* by bacterial infection as the primary problem. My general rule of thumb as far as whether or not a trip to the vet is indicated is the presence or absence of individual lesions (“pimples,” pustules, wheals, etc.), hair loss, or moderate to extreme discomfort. EVERY dog and cat scratches at some time. But persistence needs relief !

More information on allergies, as well as many other health topics for pets, can be found at the new website created by the Veterinary Information Network for pet owners. Go to www.veterinarypartner.com. For the current topic, type allergies into the search box. At least a dozen references dealing with many aspects of allergies in pets will have links. And please visit our website as well, www.sleepyhollowanimalhospital.com.