



Faith Animal Hospital



ALLERGIES & ITCHY PETS

Your pet is suspected to have skin disease due to allergies (allergic dermatitis). Human allergies often cause watery eyes, runny noses, and other hay-fever signs. Animals with allergies primarily exhibit itchy skin, often worsened by rubbing and chewing. Pets with allergies are often very uncomfortable and may spend much of their time scratching, rubbing, licking, and chewing affected areas.

Although allergies cannot be cured, controlling your pet's symptoms is possible. There are three main types of allergies in animals: flea bite allergy, atopic dermatitis (atopy) and food allergies. Pets may have one or a combination of these 3 categories. Your vet will also try to rule out other causes of itching as well including mange and ring worm.



Flea allergy is the most common cause of allergic reactions in cats and dogs and can occur at any age and any time of year. Allergy to flea bites occurs when a protein in the flea's saliva is deposited in the skin. As little as one bite can trigger inflammatory reactions resulting in itchiness. Strict, year-round flea control is crucial for the treatment/prevention of flea allergy dermatitis.



Atopic dermatitis (allergic dermatitis, atopy) is a hypersensitivity to a variety of common substances in the environment including plant pollens, house dust mites, or mold spores. Specialized allergy testing is the only way to identify the allergens affecting the animal. Testing also allows for an allergy vaccine to be customized to your pet's needs. This works by helping the pet build immune tolerance, which decreases the pet's reaction to the allergen when encountered. Most allergic dogs begin to show signs between one and three years of age.



Food allergies often cause year-round itchiness in animals. Pets mount an immune response to protein components in food, such as beef and chicken. The only way to diagnose a food allergy is to feed your pet a strict hypoallergenic diet for 10-12 weeks. The food elimination diet should consist of a protein source that your pet has never eaten before (i.e., rabbit, duck, and venison). Alternatively, a hydrolyzed protein diet can be used in which the protein is broken down into pieces too small for the immune system to recognize (i.e., Purina HA, Royal Canin HP, and Hill's Z/D). Your pet must **ONLY** eat this diet for the duration of the trial. All other treats, snacks, and flavored medications must be avoided during the food trial.

***Grain free food is **NOT** a hypoallergenic food and should be avoided due to its known association of causing heart disease.

Allergies predispose animals to secondary skin and ear infections with bacteria and yeast. Scratching, chewing and licking create moist and warm environments where bacteria and yeast like to grow. These infections increase inflammation and irritation, causing more itchiness.

Treating allergies is often based on trial and error with different medications and supplements. There are many types of medications used to control itch. What works well for one pet, may not work for another pet. Your veterinarian will discuss what options are best for your pet.

Steroids: Steroids can be used for short term allergy control to “break the itch cycle” by suppressing the immune system and reducing inflammation. We typically use a short tapering dose of oral steroids or a short acting injection for their acute anti-inflammatory effects. This medication should be avoided for long term use due to negative side effects.

Apoquel: This oral medication works by blocking the itch sensation. It is popular as it works fast and can be used safely long term. It can make a dog more prone to getting mange; when a dog is on this long term we recommend using Bravecto or Nexgard for flea/tick control as both of these products can help prevent mange.

Cytopoint: This injection uses vaccine technology to eliminate one of the main mediators of itch sensation. The injections provide itch relief for 1 month in 80% of dogs and show effectiveness usually within 24 hours of the injection.

Antibiotics: Pets with allergies frequently have secondary skin infections. In addition to anti-itch medications, your veterinarian may prescribe different antibiotics for the skin as needed. This may come in pill form and/or medicated shampoos.

Omega 3 fatty acid supplements: These products are not analogous to adding dietary oil to the pet's food, such as olive oil, coconut oil, corn oil etc. Instead, these special fatty acids act as medications, disrupting the production of inflammatory chemicals within the skin. By using these supplements, it may be possible to postpone the need for additional medications or reduce the dose needed to control symptoms. It takes a good 6 weeks to build up enough omega 3 fatty acids in the body to see a difference.

Shampoos/topical products: There are many shampoos that can help with itch. Some pets benefit from oatmeal shampoo, others need medicated shampoos. Douxo shampoo and mousse contains phytosphingosine, a natural skin biochemical important in maintaining the skin's natural barrier to infection and inflammatory substances. Phytosphingosine is moisturizing, anti-inflammatory (both directly and by fortifying the skin's barrier function), and has antimicrobial properties (preventing and treating bacterial as well as yeast infections).

Flea control: Whether or not your animal stays indoors or goes outdoors, we always recommend year round flea prevention. Fleas can come indoors on rodents, other pets, and can even come in through shared walls. Please ask our staff about what product is right for you and your pet!

Itching and allergies are a frustrating disease for both the owner and the pet. Unfortunately, there is no magic diagnosis or treatment but we will work together to determine the right combination of treatments to make your pet comfortable, happy and itch free!