

Is Your Dog Allergic To Its Food?



Just like humans, dogs can have an allergic reaction to almost anything. Although some allergies are easy to identify and straightforward to manage, owners often need to turn detective to identify the cause of a food allergy so it can be eliminated from the diet.

The most common allergy in dogs is Canine Atopic Dermatitis, otherwise known as Atopy, which is thought to be more probably a genetic disposition to hypersensitivity. It occurs due to an overreaction of the immune system brought about by environmental substances such as house dust mites, mould spores and seasonal pollen. Allergic skin disease can also be caused by diet, though it is less common and only represents about 15% of atopic cases seen by veterinarians. Unfortunately, dogs that suffer from one allergy can quickly and without any apparent reason to its owner, develop a food allergy too.

Most current research on this subject suggests that the true diagnosis of dogs suffering from an allergy to food is uncommon and, because of the complicated nature of the condition, accurate statistics for the incidence of food allergy in dogs is generally thought to be unavailable. The research does however point towards food sensitivities being the third most likely skin allergy after flea-allergy and atopy.

So, if a dog is observed relentlessly scratching and if they seem to be developing patches of inflamed skin or have areas of hair loss – it is worth investigating whether fleas, dust mites or ticks could be the culprits first. After that possibility has been rejected, ask whether something within the environment might have changed to irritate the dog's skin, ears, or paws. A change of carpet, floor cleaners and aerosol room sprays are likely suspects inside the home, while chemicals used recently in the garden or on pavements outside the home should also be considered a likely cause.

A dog with an abnormal skin reaction (flaking, redness and/or lumps) should be seen by a vet as soon as possible, because there are many causes other than an allergy, including some which are serious enough to be life-threatening. It is useful to point out that although a food allergy is likely to be genetic, puppies under six months of age do not tend to display any reactions or symptoms to this condition, which means any symptoms puppies display is likely to be connected to another illness, abnormality or poison. Certain breeds of dog are recognised to be more susceptible to allergies than others and these include boxers, cocker spaniels, springer spaniels, collies, dalmatians, German shepherds, Ihasa apsos, miniature schnauzers, retrievers, shar peis, soft-coated wheaten terriers, dachshunds, and west highland white terriers.

Skin reactions are not the only symptoms associated with a food allergy. It is important to recognise that a reaction to certain types of food or a particular ingredient in food can occur spontaneously, even when a dog has been on the same diet for many years. It is fair to say however that when these symptoms start occurring following a recent change of diet (even the addition of a new regular fed treat) it is indicative of an allergic reaction to something in the new food.

Symptoms occur non-seasonally, so the reaction is not dependent on high pollen count periods. Vomiting, diarrhoea, loss of weight, excessive flatulence, refusal to eat, itchy feet and/or ears, excessive thirst, constipation, excessive stretching (typical in dogs with upset stomachs), difficulty breathing, some loss of vision, incontinence and seizures are all potentially linked to a food allergy. Of course, these individual symptoms could also indicate other serious health issues, which is why it is essential a vet diagnoses the nature of the condition and eliminates other more serious problems before settling on a diagnosis of food allergy.

Treating a dog with a food allergy - thereby making him or her feel comfortable again - is difficult and complex, but not impossible.

The first step in this journey is to treat the most obvious problems, which are the secondary symptoms, including any itchy, scratched, inflamed and broken areas of skin. Consequential bacterial or yeast skin infections will be painful and irritating and are likely to become worse if left unmanaged. Depending on the nature of the primary and secondary symptoms, a vet may prescribe an antihistamine such as Benadryl to help reduce the effects of airborne allergens, but this won't help if the problem is entirely due to the dog's diet. The vet may prescribe a steroid, such as Prednisolone, in cream or tablet form, which will also help ease the itchy skin (as steroids are linked with kidney disease and many other serious side effects, this should only ever be considered a temporary solution).

An antibiotic tablet and/or cream may also be prescribed, if the skin has become infected through scratching, but again this will only treat the secondary symptom and not the problem causing the irritation. In the most severe cases, a vet may prescribe cortisone – but

I would question the continued use of this powerful drug if it were prescribed for my dog, either as an injection or tablet or in any other form, because of the extremely serious nature of potential side effects, which include the impaired ability to fight against all kinds of infection. The problem with cortisone is that it reduces the reaction of the immune system (because the immune system effectively overreacts in allergy cases), but in doing so, it also prevents the immune system properly dealing with other infections. Cortisone cream may be useful as a soothing agent, but only if it is employed as a temporary measure.

The only remedy to a food allergy is to identify the exact ingredient causing the problem - and then remove it (permanently) from the diet routine and the occasional variety of treats they are given to eat. And this is where the dog's owner must turn detective and follow a logical and meticulous process of trial, error and elimination to solve the problem. Vets can help in this process, but it is the tenacity of the dog owner that will make a difference. Sometimes the simplest of things can remedy the situation. For example, swapping to a simple diet of cooked chicken and boiled white rice for a couple of weeks may be enough to give the gastrointestinal system a rest and give the immune system time to recoup and recover. On the other hand, more complex remedies may be necessary.

The vet can be asked (and they will probably suggest it themselves) to take a blood sample, so this can be analysed. While this in isolation is not always successful in finding the cause of the food allergy, it can often point owners in the right direction and reduce the amount of time spent finding the problem allergen. There are several different types of blood test available on the market, so ask your vet which one is currently the most effective. Some test for a range of dog food allergies, others also test for known problems in manufactured pet food, such as immune globulin E. A blood test may identify the exact cause of a skin reaction or other allergy symptoms (happy days), but in many cases, it will only help find a group of elements that a dog is reacting to, and it is then a matter of trial-and-error to thin this list down to a single problem pet food ingredient.

These blood tests work by a vet injecting a dog with various known allergens and then waiting to see which ones cause a reaction. The reaction can be identified in a blood sample. Unfortunately, the very act of presenting these allergens to a dog in this way can trigger a new allergy to erupt, which wasn't previously a problem or evident in the dog. For this reason, not all vets agree blood testing is the right way to proceed.

Manufacturers will sometimes suggest tinned or dry foods that are available and which claim to deal with food allergies effectively. The problem is, many of these are very expensive – and bearing in mind a dog will ordinarily need to stay on the same diet for the rest of its life, the cost can be prohibitive. These foods work by omitting the common food allergy ingredients from products manufactured, but if you can arrange to do this yourself, you can manage the condition quite effectively and for a fraction of the cost. Moreover, some specialised foods sold as being hypoallergenic simply don't work, because they do not exclude all the allergens contained in standard pet foods.

A vet, on the other hand, will probably recommend a 'diet elimination trial', which means putting the dog on a very strict homemade diet or a specialised commercial diet for 12 weeks. During this time your dog must not consume any treats, scraps or titbits and must only eat the food that has been authorised and prescribed. Even flavoured toys are prohibited during this period because the flavour impregnated into the toy could be the very allergen the trial is aiming to exclude.

There are certain ingredients common to most manufactured dog food that are known to cause allergies in some dogs. These include beef, chicken, lamb, fish, wheat, dairy produce, corn, yeast and soy. More often than not, it is a protein-based allergy at fault, but there are many types of protein contained in dog food – so trying to find out which one is the culprit is sometimes very difficult. Also, it could be that it is not the main ingredient that is causing the problem, but one of the many preservatives, flavourings, additives or colourings. A vet will usually prescribe substitute diets during the trial period in an attempt to feed a kind of protein the dog has not had before, and therefore one that will be better tolerated. The other alternative is a true hypoallergenic diet, where the proteins are broken down into much smaller pieces than what is normally contained in standard pet foods. Sometimes a vet will advise both 'novel protein' and 'hypoallergenic' diets run concurrently for the 12 weeks.

If the first trial fails, a new one with different food (with a different set of proteins) can be attempted and so on, until a diet is found that the dog tolerates easily. Once the problem has been identified, a cost-conscious dog owner can devise and make-up their homemade diet that excludes that particular ingredient or additive. This will help make the longer-term management of a dog with a food allergy much more affordable.

Helping a dog overcome the suffering, irritation and frustration of a food allergy is extraordinarily uplifting. Mealtimes are one of the most enjoyable events in a dog's day, so despite the process being sometimes very difficult, the result is very worthwhile once achieved.

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