

Itching and Allergy in Cats

General Information for Owners

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Introduction

Coping with an itchy pet can be an extremely frustrating experience for you, the pet owner, and can truly test the limits of the human-animal bond. Persistent scratching and grooming by a cat can also result in more skin damage and even cause open wounds. The following information is intended to provide the cat owner with a basic understanding of the most common underlying causes of itching and allergies.

The Most Common Causes of Chronic Itching:

The common causes fall into three groups: ringworm, external parasites and allergies. External parasites that most commonly cause chronic itching dermatitis include **fleas** and **various types of mange**. In itchy cats, we do some culture tests for ringworm, so we can be sure that is not the problem. We often recommend therapeutic trials for mange in chronically and severely itchy cats. We *always* recommend stepped-up flea control and monitoring for fleas, as flea infestation can really make allergy worse!

What are allergies?

Allergy is a state of *hypersensitivity* in which exposure to a harmless substance known as an *allergen* induces the body's immune system to "overreact". The incidence of allergies is increasing in both humans and their pets. People with allergies usually have "Hay Fever" (watery eyes, runny nose and sneezing) or asthma. While cats can rarely also have respiratory allergies, more commonly they experience the effects of allergic hypersensitivities as skin problems. Though there are a variety of presentations, this can often be seen as redness and itching, a rash called 'miliary dermatitis' and over-grooming with hair loss.

What are the Major Types of Allergies in Cats?

Flea Allergy

Flea allergic dermatitis is the most common skin disease in dogs and cats. For the flea allergic patient, 100% flea control is essential for the pet to remain symptom-free. **"But doctor, I never see fleas on my pet."**- You may not see them, but that does not mean they are not there. The allergy is caused by the flea's saliva, and it only takes a few bites to induce the problem. Also, the itchy pet often grooms so much that adult fleas are removed, making them hard to find. **"If fleas are the problem, why is my pet still itchy in the winter."** – In warm climates or in our homes, fleas may survive in low numbers year-round. Because flea allergy is so common, we recommend that complete flea control be instituted before proceeding with diagnostics for other allergies and that year-round flea control be maintained for all allergy patients.

Food Allergy

Some pets develop specific hypersensitivities to components of their diets. The allergen usually is a major protein or carbohydrate ingredient such as beef, chicken, fish, corn, wheat, or soy. Minor ingredients such as preservatives or dyes are also potential allergens. The diagnosis of food allergy requires that we test your pet by feeding special strict diets that contain only ingredients that she has never eaten before. This is often achieved by feeding a prescription diet for a period of 10 - 16 weeks. If the signs resolve,

a challenge is performed by feeding the former diet and watching for a return of the itching. If this occurs, a diagnosis of food allergy is confirmed.

Atopic Dermatitis

Atopic dermatitis (AD) is an inherited predisposition to develop skin problems from exposure to variety of commonplace and otherwise harmless substances including the *pollens* of weeds, grasses and trees, as well as *house dust mites* and *mold* spores.

Diagnosis of AD is made based on the results of intradermal skin testing or by *in vitro* blood testing. Evaluating the results of these tests helps us compile a list of allergens for a “vaccine” that is made to decrease the pet’s sensitivity. Sometimes multiple skin and/or blood tests are necessary to accurately assess the patient’s allergies.

Secondary Infections

Allergies are often the underlying cause of recurring skin and/or ear infections. Bacterial and yeast infections, though secondary to the allergy, can cause an increase in your pet’s level of itching. Long term treatment with antibiotics medications may required.

Can allergies be cured?

Unfortunately, there is no cure for allergy and it is usually a life-long problem. We seek to *control* allergy and improve the quality of life for both you and your pet. We will formulate the best program of management that suits all involved with your pet’s care.

Can I have the itching treated without the expense of diagnostic testing?

Symptomatic drug therapy can help to reduce itching. Steroids, such as prednisone tablets or steroid shots, are often employed to stop the itch. However, without addressing the underlying cause, the itching will return. Long term use of steroids can result in many health problems. This is the reason that we encourage diagnosis of the underlying cause of the allergy and more specific or less potentially harmful treatments.