



Treatment Options for Pets with Allergic Skin Disease

Allergic skin disease is a very common skin problem seen in both dogs and cats. It can cause itching, hair loss, skin inflammation and redness, secondary infection and skin trauma. It can be very irritating to both pet and owner.

Skin allergies can develop at any age but are usually first seen in young animals. Some breeds have greater likelihood of developing skin allergy than others. The cause of the allergy can be diagnosed by allergy testing. This involves either a blood sample or a procedure called intradermal skin testing. An allergy can develop to anything in your pet's environment or diet but environmental allergies are more common than food allergies. Examples include allergies to pollens, grasses and dust mites.

The best solution to treating any allergy is to minimise contact between your pet and the causal allergen. However, this is often not practical, particularly if your pet has an allergy to a grass for instance. Allergies are usually life-long conditions and treatment is aimed at managing the symptoms rather than curing the disease. This means that treatment is going to involve both time and financial commitment.

Choosing a treatment

There are three main treatment options:

1 – Immunotherapy

This is also known as desensitisation or allergy vaccination. The process involves having a vaccine made up for your pet which contains dilute allergens which your pet is allergic to. The vaccine is given at regular intervals by injection under the skin. Over time the dose and length of time between injections is increased until a maintenance dose is reached of 1ml of vaccine given once a month. The vaccine is kept refrigerated and the injections are something which we can teach owners to give to their pets at home! The success of this therapy varies between 50-80% in most studies. Improvement is not expected for the first few months so this is not a quick fix option! Injections should be continued for a minimum of one year before treatment is considered ineffective. The main advantage of this treatment is that it has few side effects and unlike other treatments it aims to address the underlying disease.

2 – Ciclosporin (Atopica)

This is an oral medication which is given once daily. It works by dampening down the skin's immune system so that it no longer over reacts to allergens which have previously been causing symptoms. Ciclosporin is currently licensed for use in dogs only but it has been shown to be effective in cats too. Most patients respond well to treatment with the patient often appearing cured. The dose can be reduced to every other day and in some cases 2-3 times per week after about 6-8 weeks. However, your pet will need to be on this drug long term as stopping it completely will cause the skin to flare up again. The main disadvantages of this treatment are that it can be expensive and initially can cause a transient vomiting and diarrhoea. This usually resolves after a few days. Most patients show improvement within 4-6 weeks. More information can be found on the website www.itchfree.co.uk.

3 – Symptomatic treatment of flare ups

This is most appropriate for the treatment of patients with seasonal allergies who may only have symptoms for a short period of the year and so do not need continuous treatment. This option will usually involve a course of anti-histamines, steroids, antibiotics and shampoos.

Frequently asked questions

I take anti-histamines for my allergies; can I give them to my pet?

Anti-histamines are used to control allergies in pets but on their own they are not very effective. We usually use anti-histamines in combination with other anti-itch drugs such as steroids. Studies have found that using anti-histamines alongside steroids often means that a lower dose of steroid is effective compared to when steroids are given on their own. This is good because it reduces the likelihood of side effects from steroids. Always check the appropriate dose for your pet with your vet before giving them.

Steroids make my pet much better; can't they be used long term?

Steroids are very effective at reducing inflammation, redness and itching. We use them often in skin cases because of this. They are also fairly cheap. The problem with steroids is that they have many side effects especially when used for long periods or at high doses. These include increased thirst and urination, increased appetite leading to weight gain, panting, reduction in immunity and at higher doses can lead to skin and coat thinning, pot-bellying and secondary hormonal disease. If a patient's symptoms can be controlled by a low dose of steroids every two to three days then this may be an appropriate option.

How often can I shampoo my pet?

You may be given a medicated shampoo to treat your pet's skin condition. Your vet will tell you how often to use this; usually twice a week initially. As a maintenance treatment the frequency may be decreased to once a week or fortnight. The important thing with medicated shampoo is to allow an appropriate contact time with the skin. This is usually 10 minutes before rinsing it off.

Can I use human shampoo on my pet?

This isn't ideal, especially on pets that have already got skin problems. This is because humans have a different skin pH to dogs and cats, and this is necessary for the skin to function properly.

Are there any supplements I can give my pet to help its skin?

Yes – this is a great idea! With a supplement it is best to use the highest quality product you can afford. Supplements contain Essential Fatty Acids (EFAs) which help to maintain a moisture and flexible skin barrier. Please ask your local branch for details of products available.

If you have any further questions, or are concerned about your pet, please do not hesitate to contact us for further information.

