



How to do a Diagnostic Food Trial

About 10% of dogs with itchy skin are itchy because they have an underlying food allergy. The allergy can be to any ingredient within their diet or treats. The most common food allergies we see in dogs include chicken, beef, egg, corn, wheat, soya and milk.

You may think that because you feed a beef flavoured diet that it won't contain any of these other products but if you read the ingredients list carefully you will often find this is not the case.

When to suspect a food allergy

The symptoms of food allergy are variable and often include:

- Skin problems – itching and redness, with bald areas appearing. Feet, face, armpits and groin are often affected.
- Recurrent ear infections.
- Gastrointestinal problems – vomiting, diarrhoea, flatulence.

If you suspect your dog may have a food allergy this should be discussed with your vet.

Diagnosing a Food Allergy

There is no blood test for food allergy diagnosis which is 100% reliable. The most effective method of testing is an exclusion diet trial. There are two ways of doing this.

Method One

You can feed your dog a diet which contains a source of protein and carbohydrate which they have never been fed before. This could be a commercial food or a home cooked diet. Examples of such ingredients include salmon and potato, venison and rice, duck and soya etc. A home cooked diet is time consuming and involved so most owners will opt to feed a ready-made commercial food and most manufacturers do these.

The crucial point with this method is to feed ingredients which your dog has never eaten before and therefore will not be hypersensitive to.

Method Two

This involves feeding a commercially produced HYPOALLERGENIC diet. These diets are formulated with very tiny protein and carbohydrate molecules. Most proteins and carbs in standard diets are over 10,000 daltons in size. In hypoallergenic diets they are less than 3000 daltons. This means they are too small to create an allergic response. Your vet will recommend a reliable hypoallergenic diet. This is important because not all diets labelled as hypoallergenic are truly so.

In both cases the chosen diet is fed exclusively for a minimum of 6-8 weeks. During this time your pet must only be fed the chosen diet food and water. You must not feed anything else otherwise you may be counteracting the benefits of the diet trial. For example if you carry on feeding chews that contain chicken flavouring and your dog is allergic to chicken then they are likely to continue to have symptoms whilst on the diet trial. This could give the impression that the diet trial was unsuccessful when in reality the pet's symptoms haven't improved because they have still been exposed to chicken in the chews!

Other things that need to be stopped during the diet trial include any treats, chews, bones, toothpastes, supplements, milk, vegetables, biscuits etc. This may seem difficult but if it results in your pet's symptoms being cured then it will be worth it!

How to know if a diet trial is working

The diet trial will last for a minimum of 6-8 weeks. If there is marked or complete improvement in your pet's symptoms then a food allergy can be suspected. To confirm this, your pet should be challenged by returning to feeding the original food ingredients. If there is a relapse then a food allergy can be diagnosed.

Identifying the Culprit!

In order to identify the ingredient responsible it is necessary to challenge your pet by re-introducing ingredients one at a time on a fortnightly basis. For example, whilst continuing with the diet trial food you could introduce chicken initially. If over a two week period there is no relapse then we can assume that the dog isn't allergic to chicken. Next a second ingredient such as rice is introduced, and so on. The return of symptoms after challenge is usually seen between 1 hour and 14 days. Often pets are allergic to more than one ingredient which can make things even more challenging!

For some owners it is enough just to see that their pet's symptoms resolve when on the diet trial and then return when they start feeding their original food. You may decide that you are happy to simply continue with the food used in the trial process on a long term basis. This is fine although if feeding a home cooked diet you need to check with your vet that your pet doesn't also need a multivitamin supplement to avoid deficiencies.

Remember, when embarking on a food trial it is really important that you do not give your dog any treats, chews, toothpastes, supplements, milk, vegetables, table scraps or biscuits as these could interfere with the results, and your dog's symptoms may not improve.

If you have any further questions or think your dog may be suffering from a food allergy, please do not hesitate to contact your local branch for further information and advice.

