

Food and Flea Bite Allergies

The previous section of this article dealt with atopy or inhalant allergies. This article will deal with food allergies or to be more precise, food sensitivities. Much of the information presented here is drawn from "Hair and Skincoat Problems in the Dog" by Lowell Ackerman D.V.M. and an interview with Dr. Scott Krick of the VCA Sinking Spring Veterinary Hospital. Food allergies account for only about 10% of allergy problems in dogs, however they are easily treated so it makes sense to test for them if you suspect they may be the culprit of your dog's skin problems.

Like inhalant allergies, food sensitivities primarily manifest themselves with itchy skin. Other symptoms include anal itching, shaking of the head, ear inflammations, licking front paws, rubbing faces on carpeting and rarely vomiting, diarrhea, flatulence, sneezing, asthma like symptoms, behavioral changes or seizures. Many people don't suspect food allergies as the cause of their dog's itching because their pet has been fed the same food all its life and has just recently started having symptoms. However, animals can develop allergies to a substance over time, so this fact does not rule out food allergies. Another common misconception is that dogs are only sensitive to poor quality food. If the dog is allergic to an ingredient it doesn't matter whether it is in premium food or the most inexpensive brand on the market. One advantage to premium foods is that some avoid common fillers that are often implicated in allergic reactions.

DIAGNOSIS

Dogs are not allergic to a dog food per se, rather they react to one or more of the ingredients in the food. Some of the most common culprits are beef, pork, chicken, milk, whey, eggs, fish, corn, soy, wheat and preservatives. Many animals are now developing allergies to lamb as well. This was once thought to be very hypo-allergenic, but the more it is used, the more sensitivities are springing up.

The first step in diagnosing a food allergy is to eliminate all possible allergens and feed **ONLY** a homemade diet with ingredients the dog has never eaten before. The diet should be a protein and a starch. Good examples are one part lamb, rabbit or venison mixed with two parts rice or potatoes. **NOTHING** else can be fed during this time; no biscuits, chewable heartworm pills, chew toys or any table scraps!! You must also keep the dog away from feces if he or she is prone to eating stool.

This diet should only to be fed for a short period, while testing for allergies. It is not nutritionally complete enough for long term use. Check with your veterinarian before beginning the test. If the symptoms improve during the trial diet, go back to the original food for several days. If symptoms reoccur you know that something in the food is causing the reaction. The next step is to return to the trial diet and add one new ingredient a week (i.e. add beef for one week and if no symptoms occur add corn the next week for one week).

Once you have discovered the allergen you can look for a commercial food which does not contain that ingredient. According to Dr. Ackerman, approximately 80% of dogs with

food allergies can be maintained on a commercial hypo-allergenic diet. Some of the common hypoallergenic diets include "Nature's Recipe", "Sensible Choice" and "Natural Life". "Nature's Recipe" makes a lamb and rice food, a venison and rice diet and a vegetarian diet, none contain chemical preservatives. "Natural Life" also makes a preservative free, lamb and rice food called Lamaderm. "Sensible Choice" is a third brand that is considered hypoallergenic because it contains neither wheat or corn and comes in a lamb and rice formulation.

Note: just because a food is labeled "Lamb and Rice" do not assume it is hypoallergenic. Many contain wheat, corn, soy, beef or preservatives. This process of elimination is trying and time consuming. You should be aware that it may take up to 10 weeks to see an improvement. However, it is the best method available to test for food allergies. You may wish to try switching your dog to one of the foods listed above for a month as a trial. If the dog shows improvement you know you are dealing with a food sensitivity, you just won't know which ingredient to avoid. If there is no improvement, you will need to begin the elimination testing.

Flea Allergies

This type of reaction, again usually severe itching, is not to the flea itself but rather to proteins in its saliva. Dr. Ackerman writes that dogs most prone to this problem, interestingly enough, are not dogs who are constantly flea ridden, but those who are exposed only occasionally! A single bite can cause a reaction for five to seven days, so you don't need a lot of fleas to have a miserable dog.

To test for flea allergies, a skin test is performed which must be read in fifteen minutes and again in forty eight hours. Unfortunately injections to desensitize are not very effective because it is hard to collect enough flea saliva to make a serum!

For dogs with this problem a strict flea control regime must be maintained. We would caution you, however, against using strong chemical preparations on your dog. Often times the flea control program produces more harmful effects than the fleas, including seizures and skin problems, so please use caution.