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Food Allergies in Dogs and Cats

Overview

Dogs and cats, like humans, can develop hypersensitivities to specific food ingredients. A food allergy can develop to an ingredient(s) that has recently been introduced in the form of a new diet or treat or, more often, to something they have been exposed to for a significant period of time. Food allergy can occur at any age (very young to very old) and at any time of the year. It can be one of the least itchy diseases, only causing recurrent skin or ear infections, or one of the itchiest diseases.

Symptoms

The most common symptom of food allergy is itching, which can be manifested as scratching, chewing, licking, rubbing, or pulling the hair out. In many cases of food allergies, in addition to itching, there are often recurrent skin and/or ear infections. In fact, the only symptom of a food allergy can be recurrent infections. In about 15-20% of dogs and cats with food allergy, there is often a gastrointestinal component involving the symptoms. These animals may have some recurrent vomiting and diarrhea, increased flatulence or increased bowel movements.

Causes

The most common food allergens are beef, chicken, dairy, rice, wheat, corn, egg, lamb, soy, and fish (and other seafood ingredients in cats), with beef, chicken, and dairy products being the three most common offending food allergens. As many of these ingredients are present in most commercial pet foods, treats, and in the “people” food we give our pets as treats, just switching from one brand of food to another may not necessarily determine if your pet has a food allergy.

Diagnosis

Although there are blood tests available to test for food allergy, these tests are most often inaccurate (most animals often test positive, even if they do not have a food allergy) and often the results do not correlate with what the dog or cat may be allergic to even if they do have a food allergy. The best way to definitively diagnose your pet with a food allergy is to feed a diet that excludes all of the most common food allergens for a period of time. Your veterinarian may choose a novel protein diet (a protein source your dog or cat has not eaten before and, therefore, should not be allergic to), or a hydrolyzed diet (often a chicken or soy-based diet where the proteins are broken down to a smaller size that should not cause a reaction). If improvement is noted in symptoms during this period, then a food challenge is implemented, whereby the previous diet and treats are reintroduced for 1-2 weeks, monitoring for any signs of flare up of previous symptoms (itching, ear/skin infections). If no flare of symptoms, your pet does not have a food allergy and can be on its previous diet and treats. Should a flare of symptoms occur, then your pet has a food allergy. Following confirmation of food allergy, there are one of three options: 1) you can maintain your pet on this diet for life, but this limits the variety of treats and food you can give; 2) you can switch to another limited ingredient diet that does not cause a flare of symptoms; or 3) you can perform an individual protein and carbohydrate challenge to specifically determine which ingredient(s) your pet is reacting to (refer to the page on individual food challenges). No diet is truly “hypoallergenic.” Remember, it is the absence of an offending ingredient in the diet that makes it “hypoallergenic” for your pet.

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Food Trial Options

Your vet will select a diet that they feel is the more appropriate one to confirm or rule out a food allergy in your pet. If a novel protein commercial diet selected, the two most common ones recommended are a rabbit and potato diet or a kangaroo and oat diet. Venison, duck and fish diets are occasionally recommended, however, because of possible cross reactivity of beef allergy to venison or lamb and chicken to duck, these have become less appealing diets to diagnose food allergy. A hydrolyzed diet where the proteins are broken down is occasionally recommended, however, a small percentage dogs and cats will still react to these diets if they are allergic to that protein source. Lastly, home-cooked diet trials are the “gold standard.” Again, an ideal protein source and carbohydrate source will be selected by your veterinarian. Often the commercial and home-cooked diets are lower in calories, so you may find that you need to increase the amount fed to your pet during the diet trial. It can take two or more food trials to definitively rule in/out a food allergy. Often if a hydrolyzed diet is performed with no improvement but a food allergy is suspected, then a novel protein diet is recommended as a second trial.

The purpose of the elimination diet trial is to determine if your pet has a food allergy, and if so, attempt to determine which ingredient(s) are the offenders.

Duration

The elimination diet trial is performed for a period of 6-12 weeks. During this period, it is **imperative** that your pet not receive any other food ingredients, including “people food” and flavored pet medications that are not recommended by your vet. Even a small amount of the offending ingredient can cause a flare of symptoms! There are treat options that are recommended further in the handout that are considered acceptable.

The Challenge

Confirmation of a food allergy is achieved based on not only improvement or complete cessation of symptoms while on the food trial, but recurrence of the symptoms (some or all) with challenge. Following the elimination diet trial, you will be asked to perform a broad-based challenge by reintroducing the original diet (previous diet) and all treats your dog or cat had been on prior to the diet trial. If flare of symptoms occurs within 1 week, then a food allergy has been confirmed. To resolve flare, please switch back to the diet trial food for 1-2 weeks until resolution of symptoms. At this time, there are 1 of 3 options: 1) maintain your pet on the elimination diet trial food for the remainder of your pet’s life; 2) your vet can recommend another over-the-counter relatively limited ingredient diet that hopefully will not cause flare (repeat the challenge process for 1 week to ensure no flare); or 3) proceed with individual ingredient challenge outlined further in the handout to identify specifically what your pet is allergic to. With option 3, once the offending ingredient(s) has been identified, all you have to do is avoid the offending ingredient(s) in the food and treats. You must read the ingredient list because what is on the front of the bag does not include all the ingredients! Please do not hesitate to notify us of your pet’s food allergens as we may be able to help you select a diet and treat options that do not induce flares. Cats often are not open to performing an individual ingredient challenge, especially to carbohydrate sources. If a challenge is not possible, you can maintain on the diet selected for the elimination trial or try a recommended over-the-counter limited ingredient diet that does not cause a flare in symptoms.

Frequently Asked Questions

Are there any other forms of food I can feed my pet during the elimination diet trial?

It is imperative that the trial remains strict and that the only treats that are fed are those recommended in this handout or by your vet recommending the trial. Again, one bite of a food not recommended as part of the diet trial may ruin the entire trial. Remember, no rawhides, table scraps, dog biscuits, cat treats, etc are allowed during this period.

What if my pet is not wanting to eat the recommended diet?

Please call us! There are other possible alternatives for a good diet trial, and we are here to help you select one that your pet will eat. Occasionally adding in some canned food of the same diet will entice your pet to eat. Some pets are more open to eating the food following a slow transition from their current diet to the recommended diet by adding an increasing amount of the recommended diet and decreasing amount of their original diet over a period of 3-5 days. Most of the prescription diets are able to be returned with a refund if your pet will not eat it.

Where else can I buy the prescription diets?

We are happy to offer several options for food elimination diet trials. Several regular veterinarians may offer the same diet we are recommending, and we are happy to provide a written prescription. An excellent on-line source is www.vetcentric.com, which will ship the food directly to your house.

How can I give my pet medications during the diet trial?

Giving pets medications can be tricky. Hiding the medication in food has often made this a more tolerable job. However, during the trial, most foods you hide the pills in are no longer acceptable. You can try hiding the food in a plain tater tot or in a meatball of the canned version of your diet trial food. The other option is to place the medication as far back in the throat as you can, close the mouth and massage the throat until your pet swallows. Another trick is to squirt some water from a syringe (no needle) into the mouth after you have inserted the pill, forcing your pet to swallow.

What are some medications that my pet cannot be on during the diet trial?

Most medications are fine. However, flavored medications should be avoided as the ingredients used to flavor the medication may be one that is triggering the allergy. Commonly flavored medications include heartworm prevention (Heartgard, Interceptor), Rimadyl, Deramaxx, various antibiotics (Baytril), several vitamin or other health supplements. Please alert us if you think your pet is on a flavored medication. Most medications come in a non-flavored form, and we can work with your regular vet in selecting the appropriate alternative.

What if my pet is on a flavored heartworm preventative?

If you are treating your pet during the diet trial for possible parasites with Revolution, a topical spot on, or Ivermectin, then your pet is covered for heartworms. You will not need to resume heartworm prevention for 4 weeks past the last dose of either product. Alternatively, you can give the heartworm preventative at the beginning of the diet trial and again at the end (if not exceeding 8 weeks) with no concern for contraction of heartworms. If exceeding 8 weeks for your diet trial, please discuss with us your alternatives for prevention.



Individual Ingredient Challenge

The individual ingredient challenge will be recommended to be performed following confirmation of a food allergy (improvement with the elimination diet trial followed by recurrence of symptoms with a broad-based challenge). This process may take a few months, but it is rewarding in that you can specifically identify the offending allergen(s), allowing you to select over-the-counter diets and treats that your pet can safely eat without flare of symptoms.

To perform the challenge, one ingredient from the list is added in a small quantity to the elimination diet food daily for 1 week, watching for flare in symptoms. This individual ingredient is now considered an allergen. This ingredient should not be fed in any form for the remainder of your pet's life. For example, if you add a small amount of beef daily to the elimination diet food and find recurrence of symptoms, your pet is allergic to beef and all beef products should be avoided, including rawhide. If flare occurs with an individual ingredient, stop feeding the ingredient and feed only the elimination diet food until resolution of the flare, usually 1-2 weeks. Once you have identified all possible allergens, you need to ensure whichever food and treats you select to feed is absent of these ingredients by reviewing the ingredient list on the back of the bag/box. Please call us if you want help in selecting a diet.

| Ingredient | Results |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| Beef (boiled hamburger) | _____ |
| Chicken (boiled skinless) | _____ |
| Fish (cod, halibut) | _____ |
| Dairy (cheese) | _____ |
| Egg (hard-boiled) | _____ |
| Rice | _____ |
| Wheat (bread) | _____ |
| Corn | _____ |
| Soy (tofu) | _____ |
| Other _____ | _____ |
| Other _____ | _____ |