

Managing allergic skin disease in dogs and cats



What are allergic skin conditions?

Allergic skin conditions that can result in itchy, red skin are usually caused by a reaction of the immune system to allergens in a dog or cat's environment.

Allergic skin disease can be caused when a pet inhales, eats or otherwise comes into contact with allergens, and pets can be mildly to severely affected.

Symptoms can include scratching, biting, licking, nibbling and rubbing at affected areas, with common conditions including atopic dermatitis, food hypersensitivity, flea allergic dermatitis and contact dermatitis.

Most allergic skin diseases appear between six months and three years of age, but they can occur at any age.

Any dog or cat can develop the condition – it is less common in cats, but they are nonetheless susceptible!

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can change from case to case, and can be breed or species specific, so please treat the below as a rough guide.

Symptoms in dogs	Symptoms in cats
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Redness of the skin, especially around the belly, groin, armpits, feet or ears.• Scratching, licking and chewing, often around the feet.• Recurrent ear or skin infections.• Hair loss caused by scratching or chewing.• Runny, red eyes or nose.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Itchy skin.• Over-grooming (licking, chewing, biting).• Hair loss and hair thinning, especially on the head, neck, underbelly and inner thighs.• Rashes.• Recurring ear infections.• Thickened skin.

How is allergic skin disease diagnosed?

It can be caused by many conditions, so there is no single test for it, but it is diagnosed by ruling out potential causes and underlying parasites and diseases.

Your vet will make a diagnosis based on your pet's health history, symptoms and any necessary tests. A multi-step process may need to take place before a diagnosis is reached, and can include:

- Your pet's full medical history
- A physical exam to assess how and where the skin is affected.
- Parasite treatments to remove pests that may be causing itching.
- A diet trial to check for food sensitivities.
- Samples of hair and skin via scrapings, tape, hair plucks and biopsies to rule out bacterial and yeast infections, parasites, skin cancers and autoimmune diseases.
- Blood tests to check for underlying illness such as liver problems, hormone disorders and allergies.
- Trials to assess your pet's response to anti-inflammatory and anti-itch medications.

Managing allergic skin disease in dogs and cats



How is it treated?

Your pet will require a unique treatment plan, and it often takes time to try different treatments and find the combination that works best for your pet. Options include:

Dietary modification

- If a trial shows your pet has a full or partial food hypersensitivity, they may need a long term hydrolysed diet which alters the immune system's reaction to food, or a diet experimenting with an alternative protein source, such as soya.
- Feeding anti-inflammatory fatty acids has been reported to possibly improve the skin barrier function.

Environmental modification

- Avoiding allergens can be difficult, but your vet can recommend ways to minimise skin exposure, inhalation and ingestion of pollens, grasses, storage mites and house dust mites if needed.

Topical or skin barrier treatments

- Medicated shampoos, left on for 10 minutes, can be used two to three times weekly.
- Leave-on mousses and gels can prolong the soothing action of shampoos.
- Antimicrobial wipes can reduce infection between toes and facial skinfolds.
- Steroid sprays can be used for particular problem areas.

Oral and injectable medications

You can discuss the suitability and safety of medications with your vet, but there are various options.

- **Steroid tablets** can be very effective when used at specific doses, but can cause a range of side effects such as increased drinking, appetite and urination, as well as panting and tiredness. Long term use without breaks or at non-sparing doses can lead to long-term health risks.
- **Certain immunosuppressants** can help with reducing itching and inflammation but may also block other areas of the immune system. Regular blood tests are strongly advised if taking this route, which is only licenced for use in dogs and cats over six months of age.
- **Anti-cytokine treatments** are commonly used with canine patients but are only licensed in dogs.
- **Monthly injections** of canine antibodies can give anti-itch and anti-inflammatory relief, and have an excellent safety profile, but require a monthly injection appointment and vary in effectiveness, and are licenced for use in dogs only.
- **Antihistamine tablets** are not authorised for use in pets and have limited supporting evidence for use, although there is anecdotal evidence to suggest they have been useful as an element of managing some cases.

Managing allergic skin disease in dogs and cats



Immunotherapy

- Retrains the immune system to tolerate allergens by regularly injecting small doses of them. The dose is gradually increased to improve tolerance, and then maintained for life. Allergy testing is needed first to determine which allergens to inject.
- The success rate is around 40-50% and it can take a year to know if it will work.
- A combination of these, or more treatments at certain times of year, is often needed.

Antibiotics and antimicrobials

- Inflamed skin is vulnerable to infection, and your pet may need antibiotics or antimicrobials in the form of creams, foams, gels or shampoos. The use of drops or tablets that are taken orally can lead to antimicrobial resistance, so topical treatment is usually offered first.

What is the outlook for dogs and cats with allergic skin disease?

- It's generally a lifelong condition, and although it can't be cured, it can be managed!
- Flare-ups and periods where the skin is well-controlled are common.
- Symptoms can change seasonally, due to factors such as increased dust mites when the central heating is on, or pollen in spring and summer.
- Continued proactive treatment is recommended even when the skin is good, to reduce the frequency of flare-ups and skin infection. Reaching a diagnosis and finding the right treatments can take time, but we can help your pet achieve a comfortable life with minimal itching.

For further advice, please get in touch to book an appointment!