



# ALLERGIES & HOW TO MANAGE THEM

One of the most common conditions veterinarians see in their practice is also one of the most frustrating. Allergies. Any pet owner who suffers from allergies themselves can certainly understand the misery that allergies can cause their pets. While allergies can plague both pets and people year-round, they are usually a seasonal problem. There are dozens of different items that we breathe in or come into contact with that may trigger allergies, and these pollens and proteins come and go from day to day, week to week and season to season. Local weather forecasters often include a "Pollen Index" as a warning to allergy sufferers.

Typically, Autumn is our worst season for allergies in North Carolina (with Spring not far behind) due to the active pollen from weeds combined with allergies to house dust, molds and mildews (particularly after the high humidity of summer) and the presence of fleas. No wonder so many of our pets suffer more during September and October than any other season.

## What Effect Do Allergies Have

Many clients are surprised to discover that pets are allergic to the exact same things that people are. So why do pets scratch, bite, lick and chew while people have problems with congestion and runny eyes and noses? Quite simply, at the root of the problem is a mast cell. These mast cells within our body contain histamine. Whenever a pet or person has a sensitivity to a particular allergen (anything that triggers an allergy such as pollens, house dust, etc.) and the allergen makes contact with that mast cell, the mast cell then ruptures and releases histamine. This histamine release leads to a series of events that result in the miserable effects of allergies. Since the effect is the same in people and pets, the only difference is the location of these mast cells. In people, mast cells are mainly found in the upper air passages and sinus areas of the face. That's why we sniffle and sneeze and get congested. In pets, the mast cells are located mostly in the skin, and that's why our dogs and cats scratch, bite, lick and chew. Since the mast cells release histamine, one way we can find relief is by using an anti-histamine !

## There Are No Cure for Allergies !

It is critical for clients to understand one very important fact: **There are no cures for allergies ! Our goal is to control and manage the allergies** and relieve the misery associated with them. This is true for both pets and people.

## The Seasonality of Allergies

As mentioned before, there is a strong seasonal nature to allergies.

- **Spring** is a time for pollens from **flowers and trees**.

- **Summer** is a time for **grass** allergies.

- **Autumn** is a time for allergies to **weeds** (ragweed, goldenrod, etc), **and fleas** are typically at their peak.

And, of course, there can be an overlap of these seasons. And there are also many other allergens that can be potentially year-round problems: house dust & dust mites, fleas, cigarette smoke, molds and mildews, feathered pillows and comforters, wool in fabrics, kapok stuffing in furniture, and even food allergies (which require a totally different method of management). So you can see that there are endless sources of allergies for both pets and people.

## Controlling Allergies

While we cannot cure allergies, there are a number of things we can do to help provide your pet with relief.

## \*\*\* FOR MILD ALLERGY CASES (Mild itchiness ... no loss of hair ... mild skin irritation)

**Frequent "Sponge Baths": If there is one simple, but powerful strategy I recommend for every pet with allergies, this would be the one thing I would do over and over again !** This simple procedure can really make a difference for indoor pets, but it requires a little effort and a disciplined pet owner. Quite simply, every time your pet goes outdoors and comes back inside, take a clean, damp cloth (dampened with WATER ONLY --- do not use Baby Wipes) and give him / her a full-body wipe-down, focusing attention on the feet (tops and bottoms), the chest and belly, the hind end, and the face, nose and neck. Our strategy is to wipe off many of the pollens and allergens that get onto the fur and work their way to the skin, and then migrate into the body where they will contribute significantly to the effects of allergies. Removing them as soon as possible can greatly help your pet.

**Antihistamines:** Antihistamines work best when the itching is mild ... when bacterial and fungal infections are under control ... and when fatty acid supplements (see next page) are given at the same time. **Since there are different types of antihistamines, if one doesn't work after ~7 days, then try a different one.** Dogs do not absorb antihistamines very well, and usually need to be given higher doses compared to human dosages. Here are several over-the-counter (OTC) products that are well worth trying.

- 1) **Benadryl (Diphenhydramine)** - Give 1 mg per pound of dog's weight 2 to 3 times daily = 25 lb dog gets 25mg 2 or 3 times daily
- 2) **Tavist (Clemastine) 1.34 mg Tablets** - Cats: 1/4 to 1/2 tablet (use 1.34mg tablet) once a day
  - \* Toy Dogs (5-15 lbs) - 1/4 tablet every 12 hours (twice a day)
  - \* Small dogs (15-25 lbs) - 1/2 tablet twice daily
  - \* Medium dogs (25-50 lbs) - 1 tablet twice daily
  - \* Large dogs (50-70 lbs) - 1 to 2 tablets twice daily
- 3) **Zyrtec (Cetirizine) 5mg and 10 mg tablets**
  - \* Toy dogs (5-15 lbs) - One 5 mg tablet once a day
  - \* Medium/Large dogs (40+ lbs) - 10 mg twice daily
  - \* Small / Medium dogs (15-40 lbs) - One 10 mg tablet once a day
- 4) **Claritin (Loratadine) 10 mg Tablet** - Dogs: Give 1 mg per 5 lbs **once a day**
  - \* Toy dogs (5-15 lbs) 1/4 tablet daily
  - \* Small dogs (15-25 lbs) 1/2 tablet daily
  - \* Medium dogs (25-50 lbs) 1 tablet daily
  - \* Large Dogs (50-75 lbs) 1 1/2 tablets daily
- 5) **Allegra (Fexofenadine) 60mg Tablet** - Dogs: 1 to 2 mg per lb **once a day**
  - \* Toy dogs 1/2 tablet (30mg total) daily
  - \* Small dogs 1 tablet (60mg total) daily
  - \* Medium dogs 1 1/2 tablet (90mg total) daily
  - \* Large Dogs 2 tablets (120mg) daily

**Antimicrobial Therapy:** Bacterial infections of the skin (pyoderma) and Yeast infections are commonly seen in allergic pets and may be an additional source of itching. Yeast infections in particular can be extremely itchy and irritating, not to mention contributing a foul odor to the skin. I highly recommend **ResiKetoChlor Leave-On Lotion** for yeast infections. As the name suggests, this lotion is applied and left on your pet (do not rinse or wash off). Use every 2 to 3 days for maximum benefit !

**Flea Control:** Certainly, if your pet has fleas, eliminating the fleas can significantly improve the itching. Ask us for details on flea control and flea products.

**Omega-3 Fatty Acids:** Just like antihistamines, fatty acids work best in cases of mild itching. We nearly always see an improvement in the luster and shine of the hair coat, but very high doses may be necessary to help relieve itching. Try **Fish Oil Capsules** at a dose of approximately **30 to 40 mg per pound of body weight every day**. We recommend veterinary formulations of Fish Oil (such as Derma3 or O3 Omega Caps) since there are no Federal regulations to oversee the production and sale of over-the-counter fish oil products for humans. Therefore, some fish oil products for humans at pharmacies or retail stores do not truly contain the dose that is labeled on the bottle. Consider asking your pharmacist for a recommendation.

**Example - For a 40 lb dog, I suggest ~1200 to 1500 mg of Fish Oil each day**

**Cool Water Baths & Oatmeal Shampoos & Other Shampoos & Rinses:**

**GOOD** - If your dog is intensely itchy, a cool (not cold!) water bath may provide quick, but only temporary relief. Cool water soothes the skin, re-hydrates the outer skin layers, and washes away allergens and pollens that can be absorbed through the skin. While relief may last only a few hours, it is easy (well, I suppose that depends on the dog !) and inexpensive.

**BETTER** - **Oatmeal shampoos and rinses** can be extremely useful for the short-term relief of itchy pets. When used with cool water, they may provide relief for up to 48 hours. Leave the shampoo on for a minimum of 10-12 minutes before rinsing off. Just make certain that you are using a product for pets, not for people.

**BEST** - There are many different shampoos and rinses that are effective for a variety of skin conditions. Among the choices are shampoos and lotions with topical anesthetics (**Relief Shampoo**), or cortisone (**Cortisoothe or ResiCort**), or antibacterials (**SulfOxyDex**), or antifungals (**Dermazole or KetoChlor**) to help treat specific skin problems. Needless to say, it's essential to use the appropriate shampoo for a particular skin condition. Leaving any shampoo on the skin for at least 10 to 15 minutes is necessary for best benefit.

**\*\*\* FOR MODERATE TO SEVERE ALLERGY CASES (Very itchy & chewy ... quite a bit of hair loss ... very red and irritated skin ... broken out with a skin infection)**

**Cortisone / Corticosteroids:** In some situations, it is necessary to use corticosteroids (cortisone) to help relieve your pet's discomfort. While we get excellent results from cortisone, the side-effects make it undesirable for long-term use. In the short-run, we see an increase in thirst and urination, increase in appetite, increased panting and sometimes pets appear more anxious or agitated. The long-term use can have a profoundly negative effect on the body's adrenal glands.

When we prescribe corticosteroids, we encourage our clients to use them only as needed. We never intend for them to be used for long periods of time. Cats are unique in that they are typically more tolerant of cortisone than dogs (cats have fewer noticeable and undesirable side-effects than dogs), yet we still make every effort to limit their use in kitties as well.

**\*\*\* FOR SEVERE OR DIFFICULT OR CONTINUOUS (CHRONIC) ALLERGY CASES**

**Lime Sulfur Shampoo/Dips:** This may be the most effective non-cortisone anti-itching treatment available. It's also effective against parasites (such as mange), skin fungus and is extremely safe. The downside??? It has a disagreeable "rotten egg" odor that nearly every client finds to be terribly unpleasant, and is preferably applied outdoors to avoid smelling up your house.

**Immunotherapy:** Allergy immunotherapy based on intradermal skin testing or blood/serum testing can be an extremely successful and very safe way to control itching due to atopy (inhalant allergies). However, it requires skin or blood tests, is more expensive than other forms of treatment, and may take weeks to months before results may be seen, but it is an excellent way to limit the need for cortisone for dogs that are severely itching, biting, scratching and chewing.

The skin test is performed like a "patch test" in people. Hair is shaved from the side of the pet, then injections are made just beneath the skin with each injection representing something in the environment that the pet may be allergic to. Typically, each dog is tested for 60-80 different items. Among the items are local grasses, weeds, ragweed, trees and shrubs, flowers, molds and mildews, house dust, epidermals (cat skin, dog skin, etc), miscellaneous inhalants (tobacco, kapok, cotton, wool, etc), feathers, house dust, fleas and insects. Whew ! As you can see, there are endless allergens out there that pets can be allergic to, and that doesn't even include food allergies.

Once it has been determined what a pet is allergic to, then immunotherapy can be used. The idea is to "desensitize" an individual to whatever it is they're allergic to. Pets (like people) must receive injections on a regular basis for the desensitization to work. Pets may need to continue injections for life in order to minimize the effects of allergies. And as mentioned earlier, it typically takes weeks to months for results to be seen. But since the majority of pets respond well to immunotherapy, it's well worth the effort since you can avoid the use of cortisone.

**Atopica (Cyclosporine):** This prescription medication has proven to be extremely effective at controlling allergies, but it is fairly expensive, and therefore more often recommended for smaller breeds of dogs. Side-effects may involve intestinal upset (vomiting and/or diarrhea), but it does *not* have the potentially harmful effects on adrenal function like steroids do.

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**In conclusion**, it can be frustrating to control your pet's allergies, and what works for one pet may not help another. But realize that there are plenty of choices available to give your itchy pet much-needed relief. Your pet doesn't have to suffer from allergies.

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