

Skin Allergies in Dogs and Cats

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Allergic skin disease occurs in dogs and cats due to fleas, the environment, and food. Skin conditions pose unique challenges in diagnosis and treatment, but certain characteristics can help differentiate each of these allergic causes.

Fleas

The saliva of fleas, a type of external parasite, can trigger an allergic reaction in your pet, leading to hair loss, redness, and intense itching. Hairless regions most commonly occur at the base of the tail, and cats may occasionally experience hair loss underneath their chins. If your veterinarian suspects a flea allergy, he or she will use a flea comb to check for evidence of live fleas or flea dirt. Your veterinarian will make recommendations for an effective topical or oral preventative and discuss methods to rid your home of fleas and their larvae. It can take several months to resolve a flea infestation.

Environment

Environmental allergies—medically referred to as atopic dermatitis—share similarities between pets and people. An irritant in the environment, such as pollen, grass, or dust causes your pet to become uncomfortable. People experience sneezing and watery eyes with environmental allergies, whereas pets experience itching and inflammation on their paws and inguinal areas. Clinical signs occur after repeat exposure to the same allergen. These allergies are more difficult to conquer due to the wide variety of probable causes. A dermatologist can perform specific allergen skin testing to narrow down the likely suspect.

Food

Food allergies develop from repeat exposure to the same diet, which sensitizes your pet to a certain ingredient of the food. Any component of the diet may result in an allergy, but protein is the most common cause. Recurrent ear infections, discolored nail beds, and skin issues on the rear half of the body suggest food allergies. Cats may also develop ulcers in their mouths, lesions around their ears, or papules on their necks. Resolving a food allergy involves strict diet trials over several months. A diet trial consists of feeding your pet a food containing a novel protein, such as venison, kangaroo, or rabbit, for two months to see if clinical signs improve. No treats are permitted during this time. Once finished with the trial, your pet is fed the old diet to see whether or not clinical signs return. Improvement on a new diet and return of clinical signs when challenged with the old diet is indicative of a food allergy. Trials continue until the right diet is found.

These conditions may take time to fully resolve. If your pet is experiencing any skin issues, it is best to schedule a veterinary appointment to pinpoint the cause and begin appropriate treatment.