



## The scratching of a pet, a possible allergy?

### What are allergies?

An allergic reaction is one in which an individual reacts to a normal substance in the environment, these substances are called allergens and include pollens, mites, moulds, fleas, and foods. Allergens cause reactions through skin contact, inhalation, or ingestion. Allergic animals possess excess IgE antibodies to the specific allergens. These antibodies react with skin mast cells and cause biomedical changes in the body which produce the clinical signs of allergy.

### Is it true that pets can have allergies?

Yes. Pets (dogs, cats & horses), just like humans, can have allergies. A large proportion of skin irritations can be attributed to allergies. It is possible that a case gets worse during the spring and summer, simple because the increased amount of allergen during these seasons.

### What are the signs of allergy?

The most common signs of allergy in pets are scratching, face rubbing, and biting and chewing the skin. Usual locations for signs of allergy are the flank, feet, face, and base of the tail. Allergies are often the underlying cause of persistent skin disease; however, it is important to note that not all scratching is due to allergy. Conditions like thyroid disease, flea biting and infections, can cause similar signs.

### How allergy is developed?

All pets with allergies inherit the tendency to develop allergies from their parents. After continued exposure to offending allergens from months to years, the signs of allergies become apparent in the pet. The typical allergic pet starts with a short period of biting and chewing. In the first year it may be mild or even unnoticeable. With repeated exposure to the offending allergens, the pet gradually experiences more prolonged and severe clinical signs.

### When are allergies most likely to occur?

Allergies occur whenever the offending allergens are present. The more common, allergens such mites or fleas will produce signs of allergy year-round, whilst allergies from plants that pollinate during warm months cause allergies only when they pollinate. Food allergy may occur by itself or it may be a component of an overall allergy problem.

### How can allergies be diagnosed?

Because of the complexity of the allergy diagnosis, the combination of patient history, physical examination and clinical signs are all important in making an accurate diagnosis. After a thorough examination, the veterinary surgeon will decide if allergy testing is indicated for the pet.

A small sample of blood may be taken and submitted to Heska's reference laboratory for diagnostic evaluation using the Heska ALLERCEPT detection system.

**Can allergies be prevented?**

Since allergies are inherited, there is no absolute way to prevent them. It is therefore generally accepted that allergies can be controlled but not prevented. The best control is achieved through avoidance of the offending allergens. If for example, the pet is allergic to fleas, it is better to prevent flea infestation. However, allergens present in the environment (mites, molds) are very difficult to avoid, resulting in the need for alternative allergy treatments.

**How are allergies treated?**

The best form of treatment is the avoidance of the offending allergens. In most cases however, this is not or partially possible. Steroid drugs are often used for short-term relief of symptoms, but prolonged use of steroids can have serious side effects specially in dogs.

With immunotherapy, a treatment set is formulated individually for the pet based on the allergy test results. The treatment is given in increasing concentrations. This builds up the tolerance of the animal to the offending allergens so it can live more comfortably in its environment. The veterinary surgeon will discuss potential alternative treatments based on the needs of the patient.

**How successful is the immunotherapy treatment?**

The success of the immunotherapy treatment depends on several factors including the overall health of the patient, the severity of the allergies, and a commitment to therapy. In general, the steps to successful allergy treatment involve the following:

1. Trying to avoid or reduce the allergens in the environment
2. Giving recommended medication to control clinical signs,
3. Identifying the specific allergens causing clinical signs in the patient, followed by allergy immunotherapy.

Some allergies dissipate with time and treatment. In other cases, animals may require continued immunotherapy to maintain tolerance to the allergens in question. With adherence to the treatment schedule, it is expected an excellent chance of reduction in clinical signs or reduced dependence on steroids or other drugs.

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