



Veterinary Dermatology Center, P.A.

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Cutaneous Adverse Food Reaction

Also Known As:

Food hypersensitivity, food allergy, food intolerance, cutaneous adverse reaction to food

Cause:

A food allergy is an allergic reaction to a substance in a pet's diet. The causes of food allergy are individual allergens in the pet's food, usually protein sources more often than carbohydrates. It is suspected that certain preservatives or food additives may elicit an allergic reaction in rare cases. A pet may be allergic to one or more substances in its food.

Affected Animals:

Dogs, cats. Any age, sex, or breed of dog or cat can develop food allergies. Food allergy is more strongly suspected if the first signs of itching start before the dog is 6 months of age or after the dog is 6 years of age.

Overview:

Ingredients in some pet foods may cause an allergic reaction in hypersensitive cats and dogs. Reactions are characterized by itching and/or gastrointestinal disorders, and are usually responses to a protein or carbohydrate source in the diet. Food allergies are the third most common cause of itching, and account for about 10-15% of all allergic skin diseases in dogs.

Unlike pets with seasonal inhalant allergies, pets with food allergies tend to itch year round, and may not experience much relief from anti-itch medications. Therefore, it is essential to identify and remove the type of food that is stimulating the allergic response.

Some pets will have other allergies concurrently, such as fleabite hypersensitivity and inhalant allergies, which have severe symptoms when they are not controlled.

Clinical Signs/Symptoms:

The only consistent sign of a food allergy is itching, which typically continues throughout the year and may fail to respond well to medications. Various skin lesions may also occur, but there is no characteristic pattern of lesions associated with food hypersensitivity. The ears, armpits, groin, and feet may be affected more commonly than other body parts. Food allergic dogs commonly present with recurrent ear infections in one or both ears. The clinical signs of food allergies in cats are more variable than in dogs. Cats may have miliary dermatitis (multiple small crusted bumps on the skin), or eosinophilic granulomas (raised, red, raw areas of skin) Vomiting, diarrhea, and more frequent but formed bowel movements can be noted in some cases.

Diagnosis:

Before food allergy can be diagnosed, other causes of itching and skin disease, such as flea bite hypersensitivity, will need to be ruled out as possible causes of the itching and gastrointestinal disorders.

The best tool for definitively diagnosing food allergy is an elimination diet trial, selected to contain a single protein and carbohydrate source to which that pet has not been previously exposed. Blood tests, saliva tests, and other types of testing for food allergies are not accurate. The best elimination diet is a home cooked diet; however, most animals will also respond well to prescription hypoallergenic diets. The special diet must be fed exclusively for a minimum of 8 weeks. If the pet has a food allergy it may begin to show signs of improvement within four weeks on the diet trial, but will often require feeding of the elimination diet for a longer time in order to completely eliminate symptoms. Following the elimination diet, the original food is fed to the pet to confirm that it does incite an allergic reaction. If the pet is food allergic, the return of clinical signs will usually occur within 10 days of restarting the original diet.

Once the diagnosis of food allergy has been established, the exact allergen is investigated by placing the pet back on the elimination diet until it is free of allergic symptoms. Subsequently, single food ingredients are added to the elimination diet one-at-a-time and the pet is assessed for an allergic reaction. This process is repeated for each ingredient. Commonly suspected allergens include chicken, beef, fish, and lamb meats; eggs and dairy products; and carbohydrate sources such as corn, wheat, soybeans, or rice (although, less likely).

Prognosis:

The prognosis for a pet with food allergy is good if the allergens can be found and eliminated from the pet's diet. Some pets will develop new food allergies with time, and hence will need to have their feeding protocol adjusted accordingly.

Treatment:

The allergen must be identified and removed from the pet's diet. If present, secondary skin infections are controlled using antibiotics or antifungal treatments. Concurrent allergies must also be controlled. Anti-itching medications may be used in the initial stages of treatment, but generally these drugs are not effective for curing food allergy symptoms, and have to be discontinued to allow correct assessment of response to food trials.

Prevention:

Avoidance of allergens is the only known preventative measure. No treats or other foods should be fed to an animal with a food allergy. Because flavored medications such as vitamins and heartworm prevention may cause an allergic reaction, replacement with non-flavored pills is recommended.