



## **Veterinary Dermatology Center, P.A.**

Dawn Logas, DVM, DACVD,

Marcia Schwassmann, DVM, DACVD,

Katherine Doerr, DVM, DACVD

9901 N. Orlando Ave. ~ Maitland, FL 32751

P (407) 629-0044 x2 ~ F (407) 629-0602 ~ [www.itchypetvet.com](http://www.itchypetvet.com)

# **Flea Allergy Dermatitis**

### **Also Known As:**

Flea bite hypersensitivity, flea allergy

### **Cause:**

When a flea bites a pet, it injects a tiny bit of its saliva into the animal's skin. Pets that are allergic to flea saliva will experience severe itching in response to the flea bite. A single flea bite can cause these symptoms in a flea allergic pet; animals without this allergy must be bitten many times before their skin becomes irritated.

### **Affected Animals:**

Any breed or sex of dog or cat can be affected at any age.

### **Overview:**

Pets that have flea allergy dermatitis are hypersensitive to the saliva a flea passes into the skin when it bites. The bite from a single flea will have a minimal effect on a normal pet, but pets with flea allergy will experience immediate itching, redness and swelling. When a pet scratches its flea bites excessively, hair loss and skin abrasions can result. Some pets will develop circular, red, painful sores called hot spots that can occur anywhere on the skin, but commonly are seen along the back and tail base.

*Flea bite allergy is the most common allergic skin disorder in pets.* Flea bite allergy can only be resolved by eliminating all fleas from the animal's environment. There are medications available, however, that will alleviate the itching and discomfort until complete flea control is achieved.

### **Clinical signs/Symptoms:**

Common findings in a pet that is allergic to fleas include increased scratching or chewing on its back, especially near the tail. Loss of hair, crusts and erosions on the skin, and pimple-like bumps may be noted. Thickened, wrinkled, and dark skin can be seen in severe cases. Hot spots may develop along a dog's back and tail base. These sores are usually circular, red, oozing, and very painful. Cats will typically have small, pinpoint crusts along their back known as "miliary dermatitis". Fleas or flea dirt (flea feces) may be seen. Cats can remove many fleas with their normal grooming behavior so the absence of fleas does not rule out flea allergy.

It may be difficult to detect fleas on a pet, but brushing the pet over a white sheet may help: flea feces, dark black debris that falls from the pet's hair onto the sheet indicate the presence

of fleas. A flea comb also can be used to look for the feces or the fleas themselves. Pets should be examined often if itching is noted.

The problem may last year-round in warm climates or in flea-infested indoor environments. In regions with cold winters, flea allergy will appear seasonally during the warmer months of the year.

**Diagnosis:**

The presence of fleas together with the appropriate clinical signs is very suggestive of flea allergy and a positive response to flea control confirms the diagnosis. Skin allergy testing with flea extract is available and can be helpful in confirming flea allergy. Your veterinarian will also look for secondary bacterial and yeast infections and other skin parasites.

**Prognosis:**

A pet with flea allergy dermatitis will always remain allergic to fleas. The severity of this allergy typically worsens as the pet ages. If fleas are eliminated from the pet's environment, the pet will stop suffering the symptoms of flea allergy. If the response is incomplete but flea control has been achieved, the pet should be re-evaluated by the veterinarian for other concurrent allergies.

**Treatment:**

The goals of treatment are to alleviate your pet's allergic reaction to fleas by preventing the flea from biting and eliminating fleas from the environment. The flea allergic pet as well as all other pets in the household should be treated. Treatment of the environment is best accomplished by a pest control professional but "do-it-yourself" products are also widely available. Your veterinarian will customize a flea control program to meet your allergic pet's individual needs.

Therapy for the allergic reaction is based on the severity of the symptoms. Following an evaluation of your pet, your veterinarian may prescribe any of the following medications: topical treatments such as medicated shampoos, steroids, apoquel, antihistamines, antibiotics, and fatty acid supplements.

**Prevention:**

Prevent fleas from entering the household. If evidence of fleas is noted on any pets in the household, early intervention can stop the problem before the symptoms become severe. Preventing a flea infestation is much easier than treating one after it has occurred so year round flea control is recommended.