



DANADA VETERINARY HOSPITAL, P.C.

Food Allergies in Dogs and Cats

Food allergies account for up to 15% of all dog allergies and less than 10% of cat allergies. Unlike food intolerances (e.g., gluten sensitivities) which are often genetically inherited, dogs and cats are not likely to be born with food allergies. More commonly, animals develop allergies to food products they have eaten over a long period of time. A dog or cat can be allergic to any food source they have ever eaten. The allergy most frequently develops in response to the protein component of the food, for example, beef, pork, chicken, or turkey. Plant proteins (grains) are far less likely to cause allergies than animal proteins.

Clinical Signs

Food allergy can cause a variety of symptoms including itching (scooting, licking, biting, rubbing), frequent vomiting or diarrhea, weight loss or difficulty gaining weight, and occasionally respiratory symptoms (from gastric reflux). Skin sores may develop anywhere on the body, but commonly affect the ears and rear end of dogs. Cats can experience a wide variety of skin symptoms ranging from facial itching, ear infections, paw biting, and red plaques along their bodies.

When to Suspect Food Allergies

Food allergy should be suspected when clinical signs have been present for several months, especially if the symptoms continue to occur after the seasons change. Additionally, food allergy is more likely when a dog or cat has a poor response to steroids, or when a very young animal itches without other apparent causes of allergy (such as fleas or other parasites). Animals with both skin and gastrointestinal symptoms concurrently should also be suspected of being food allergic. Lastly, if your pet's symptoms seem to worsen whenever they are fed a particular food or treat, it may be an indication of food allergy.

Diagnosis and Treatment

The only test that accurately diagnoses a food allergy is a treatment trial with a hypoallergenic diet. Blood tests and skin tests for allergies are not reliable as they do not screen for the type of antibodies that are responsible for allergic reactions in the gut. Since allergies depend on what a patient has been exposed to in their past, what is hypoallergenic to one animal may not be to another. After compiling a list of all the ingredients that your pet has eaten in foods, treats, medication (e.g., heartworm preventatives,) and supplements, the appropriate diet for the trial will be prescribed. This diet will contain a single protein source that your pet has not eaten before. Only prescription diets are appropriate for the diagnostic trials. Since most over-the-counter diets are manufactured in facilities that make multiple diets on the same machinery, even over the counter "hypoallergenic" diets tend to have trace amount of residue from food sources not listed on their label. Just as very mild exposure to

peanuts can cause intense reactions in some people; this cross-contamination can be enough to trigger allergic reaction in many animals.

If your dog or cat has eaten a wide variety of foods in their past, finding a novel protein source can be very difficult. In these cases, a hydrolyzed protein diet can be used. These diets consist of common proteins such as chicken, but the proteins are too small for the immune system to recognize them as allergens. As a result, the allergic reaction does not occur.

It can take up to 8 weeks for all of the old food antigens to leave the system. Therefore, diagnostic food trials take at least 8-12 weeks to complete. During that time, even one bite of another food (including human food or table scraps,) treats, or flavored medications (e.g., heartworm preventative, joint supplements, etc.) can potentially invalidate the trial, and result in the need to start the trial over.

If a patient responds favorably to the diet trial, itching and gastrointestinal signs begin to improve after 2-6 weeks. By 3-4 months after the trial is started, many food allergic patients show excellent to complete resolution of symptoms. During the food trial, medication may be used to control symptoms related to the allergy, such as vomiting and itching. Antibiotics may be necessary for any secondary infections as well.

Maintenance of a Food Allergic Dog or Cat

Once a positive response is identified, patients have three options for long-term management. Some owners choose to continue the hypoallergenic diet indefinitely. Though initially more convenient, this can become costly. Furthermore, there is a potential for some animals to eventually become allergic to the special diet and need to change to a different one years later.

Other owners decide to challenge their pet's immune system to determine what ingredients trigger the allergy. This is the only way to confirm what foods a dog or cat is allergic to. Every couple weeks, a single ingredient is added to the prescription diet. If your pet is allergic to the ingredient, they will react to it. Regardless of results, once a dog or cat has been tested on one ingredient, he or she is returned to the prescription diet for two weeks, then another ingredient is tested. Once the list of allergens is compiled, an owner can purchase foods that do not contain the offending allergens.

Lastly, some owners simply try an over-the-counter version of "hypoallergenic" food. As previously mentioned, these diets may contain trace residues of other foods. However, once a patient is confirmed to have a food allergy, any food that does not trigger the allergy is acceptable. Therefore, diets that are not right for the diagnostic part of the trial may be acceptable for maintenance of a food allergic pet.

In the unfortunate event that a well-controlled food allergy patient gets into a food they are allergic to, re-establishing their hypoallergenic diet usually leads to resolution of symptoms within 1-2 weeks. Secondary infections and GI signs may need to be managed during these flares. If symptoms do not respond quickly, a new food allergy or non-allergy cause should be suspected, and you should schedule an evaluation with your veterinarian.