

Food Reactions, Adverse

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BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Adverse food reactions, also known as *food allergy*, cause a year-round, itchy skin condition in dogs and cats. The reaction is associated with ingestion of a substance found in the animal's diet.

Causes

Beef, fish, chicken, eggs, and dairy products are the allergens to which dogs and cats most commonly develop adverse reactions. However, anything the pet eats on a regular basis can cause the allergic reaction.

Clinical Signs

No breed or gender is predisposed, and reactions can occur at any age. When the onset is in dogs younger than 6 months or older than 6 years of age, food allergy is a more likely possibility than environmental allergies. The itching is nonseasonal, because the pet typically eats the allergenic substance every day. The itchiness can be mild to very intense. The pet may develop small pimples or reddened areas that eventually become scrapes and scabs. Often, the itching leads to secondary infections of the skin and ears. Gastrointestinal signs (vomiting, diarrhea, increased frequency of bowel movements) can be seen in 10-15% of affected pets.

Diagnostic Tests

The only way to accurately diagnose the condition is through a food trial:

- The trial is done either by preparing a home-cooked diet containing a protein the pet has never eaten and a specially chosen starch (usually white potatoes) or by feeding a hypoallergenic prescription diet (available through a veterinarian).
- Proteins chosen for the trial may include venison; rabbit; goat; pinto, navy, or garbanzo beans; ostrich; or alligator.

- The food trial usually lasts 8-10 weeks and does not allow *any* treats, chew toys (other than rubber or plastic) and not even chewable heartworm medications. Any accompanying bacterial infections must be treated and resolved by the end of the trial.

Clinical improvement is suggestive of the diagnosis; however, to confirm the diagnosis, the original diet must be fed again, to prove that the itchy skin condition will return and is associated with the original diet.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

Food allergy is the easiest allergy to manage, because the offending food can almost always be avoided through the feeding of special foods. Strict control of every item that enters a pet's mouth will avoid relapses.

If needed, additional medications, baths, or rinses can be used (similar to the treatments for atopic dermatitis) until the skin and hair coat return to normal and all itchiness subsides.

Follow-up Care

Periodic rechecks are done until the animal has returned to normal and may be repeated with any return of the symptoms.

Prognosis

The prognosis is excellent as long as the offending protein is avoided. Everyone in contact with the pet must be educated as to which food or foods the pet must avoid. Care must be taken not to give the pet treats or chew toys that contain the allergen (such as beef-basted rawhide chews). Food allergy is more difficult to control in dogs and cats that roam free and may receive treats or food away from home or are allowed to raid the garbage at the neighbors' houses. The condition can also be harder to combat in households with small children who drop foodstuffs on the floor or surreptitiously feed the pet.