Itchy, Itchy! Atopic Dermatitis in Dogs

What you should know about environmental allergies and your dog

Overview/Risks

Skin problems are among the most common troubles for dogs and the cause is often difficult to identify. Allergies are one major cause of skin problems and itchiness and include flea allergy dermatitis, atopic dermatitis, and food allergies. Our pets can also suffer allergies related to the environments in which they live, and natural sensitivities to pollen, mold spores, and dust mites can cause an allergic skin condition known as atopic dermatitis.

The most common symptom of atopic dermatitis? Extremely itchy skin. However, itchy skin can lead to a variety of other skin problems and infections. Common signs of atopic dermatitis include

- Red bumps or scaly areas
- Acne-like bumps on the skin
- Darkened, thickened skin
- Hair loss
- Stained fur due to excessive licking
- Frequent shaking of the head
- A foul odor emanating from your dog's skin

Diagnosis/Treatment

If your dog is a scratching fool, it's time to visit your veterinarian! They will recommend tests to help identify the source of your dog's allergies. Because itchy skin can be caused by other conditions aside from allergies, your veterinarian may want to rule out other causes, such as parasites, bacterial or fungalinfections, or systemic diseases.

Tests can include a thorough physical examination; a parasitic examination; skin tests to rule out fungal, yeast, or bacterial infections; and other tests, such as blood and urine tests, to determine if your pet has a systemic disease.

Once your veterinarian determines that your dog has atopic dermatitis, the next step will be to determine what additional diagnostic testing is needed, such as an allergy test to determine what your dog is allergic to. This information is used to help formulate a treatment that's right for your dog.

What's next?

Your veterinarian may recommend allergen-specific immunotherapy to help desensitize your pet to the offending allergens. This involves exposing your dog to gradually increasing amounts of the allergens to which he's reacting. Think of it as having your dog face his fears: over time, his body will become accustomed to these allergens and the severity and frequency of symptoms will lessen. Immunotherapy is only way to change the long-term course of atopic dermatitis.

Other medical options include steroids and cyclosporine, which are generally effective but can cause side effects and long-term health issues for some pets. Antihistamines, fatty acids and topical therapies can also help in mild cases of atopic dermatitis, especially when paired with other forms of treatment.

Pollen and mold control

Sensitivity to molds and fungi can cause allergies in many dogs. Here's how to control fungi and mold:

- Limit outdoor exposure when offending pollen counts are high
- Keep your pet off of the lawn after mowing and away from leaf litter and other organic debris
- Reduce excessive indoor moisture in basements, bathrooms, etc.
- Wash food and water bowls frequently using hot, soapy water

Dust mite control

Hypersensitivity to house dust mites is another common allergy. It's pretty difficult to completely eliminated dust mites, but because they prefer warm, humid environments and often live in beds, carpets, and furniture, you can reduce their numbers using certain techniques:

- Reduce carpeting and upholstered furniture, and vacuum often
- Reduce dust collectors such as houseplants
- Change furnace and air conditioning filters often
- Wash your pet's bedding weekly in hot water
- Cover dog beds, pillows, and mattresses with special dust mite barriers

If you have any questions or concerns, you should

always visit or call your veterinarian – they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.