

Atopic Dermatitis in Dogs



My Dog Has Been Diagnosed with Atopic Dermatitis. What's Next?

Atopic dermatitis is similar to “hay fever” in people, but as an allergic skin condition, it causes your pet to itch. It’s caused by a dog’s natural sensitivity to common environmental substances like pollen, mold spores, and dust mites. There are many treatment options to consider, but in general it takes a combination of treatments to manage your pet’s symptoms, and it may take several tries to get it right.

Taking the First Step.

Each pet is different, and response to treatment depends on biology, breed, and environmental factors. There’s no single right answer – what works for one pet might have no effect on another. Your veterinarian will help you work through the process to get your pet back to feeling him or herself.

There are two ways to identify factors in your pet’s environment that are causing discomfort: intradermal skin testing and blood testing. Once you are able to determine the offending allergens, you can work to control them and treat your pet as appropriate.

What's Next?

Depending on what you find through allergy testing, your vet 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 the only way to change the long-term course of atopic dermatitis.

Your veterinarian may also recommend techniques to reduce exposure to the allergens in your pet’s environment. 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. Often, treating atopic dermatitis requires several different modes of treatment, and your pet may need to continue taking medications even during immunotherapy.

Besides Medical Treatment, What Can I Do?

Keeping your pet’s environment clean and free of allergens, combined with regular baths for your pet, can go a long way in giving him relief from the itchiness of atopic dermatitis.

Depending on the allergens affecting your pet, here are some ways to keep your pet’s environment clean:

1 Fungi and Mold Control

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

- 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
- Bathe your dog with hypoallergenic shampoos as recommended by your veterinarian

2 Storage Mite Control

Ingestion of storage mites, sometimes found in dry pet food, may be a cause of allergies. To prevent this,

- Buy small bags of food (less than a 30-day supply)
- Store food in cool, dry areas in airtight containers
- Consider an all-canned diet

3 Dust Mite Control

Hypersensitivity to house dust mites is another common allergy. It’s pretty difficult to completely eliminate 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 with plastic

