

**Patton Veterinary Hospital  
425 East Broadway  
Red Lion, PA  
717-246-3611**

## **Food Allergies**

Food allergies, as the name implies, is an allergy your pet develops to their food. Usually it is the type of protein in the food (beef, chicken, milk etc) but can also be to carbohydrates (rice, grains, etc). This allergy is characterized as being non-seasonal, or occurring all year round. This is in contrast to pets with environmental allergies (AKA atopy) which are only itchy seasonally. Your pet may develop a skin infection or show signs of itchiness on their stomach, around their anus, groin, feet, face and ears. The majority of ear infections veterinarians treat are due to an underlying allergy.

So you may be wondering, “How does my dog get a food allergy”? Well, the intestines are responsible for completely breaking down food to its smallest molecules. A large number of food allergic dogs have a genetic pre-disposition. Their intestinal immune system is dysfunctional and leads to the itchy signs described above. Additionally, when there is disruption to the wall of the intestines, due to gastritis, diarrhea, etc, food particles are able to slip by the defenses before it is completely broken down. The food is now looked at as foreign by your pet’s body. Their own body goes into attack mode and subsequently develops itchiness, skin and ear infections as a result.

**Food Trial:** Performing a food trial is a test for veterinarians to determine if your pet has a food allergy. The idea is to feed them a new type of protein (duck, venison, kangaroo, etc) and carbohydrate (potato, sweet potato, green pea, etc) that they have never been exposed to. An alternative is a hydrolyzed diet, which is a food that is made in such a way that the body does not recognize the primary protein (ie chicken or soy). The hallmark sign of a successful food trial is a decrease or resolution in itchiness and infections. It may take up to 8-10 weeks to achieve this. It is extremely important to understand that this new food must be the only thing your pet eats. This means no treats or human food. Dermatologists even suggest that flavorless medications, including heartworm preventatives, vitamins, etc, should be avoided. The idea of the food trial is to cleanse your pet’s system of everything they have eaten thus far. To diagnose the food allergy we need to challenge them by adding in a small amount of the original pet food at the end of the trial for a short period. If the symptoms return, then we have confirmed a food allergy. If there is no change, then we will have to look for another cause of the symptoms. The veterinarian relies on you to keep the food trial as strict as possible. The more strict you can be with the food trial, the more certainty we can give you as to whether it is a food allergy or not. Finally, once the diagnosis of a food allergy is made we can either go through the process of finding specifically what your pet is allergic to. An over the counter food can then be used by simply avoiding the ingredients that you know your pet is allergic to. The alternative is to continue feeding the prescription food that was used for the food trial.

The following suggestions are treatments you can use at home. They are needed to treat the presenting itchiness and skin infections, however, they do not treat the underlying:

- 1) **Diet**: Based on the results of the food trial or one found to help your pet the most.
- 2) **Steroids**: Steroids are great medications for decreasing itchiness and inflammation. We prefer to use them for short term use and only if your pet is extremely itchy or their ears are severely inflamed. However, when used long term their side effects become more of a problem than the allergy itself.
- 3) **Anti-histamines**: There are numerous over the counter anti-histamines available including Benadryl, Zyrtec, Claritin, and others. These medications work to decrease the amount of itchiness and redness your pet experiences. However, they are not effective in every pet. Also, some pets may respond better to different types of anti-histamines. You should continue trying anti-histamines until you find one that works. Please talk to your veterinarian for an appropriate dose for your pet. There are few side effects noted, with mild sedation being the one most commonly seen.
- 4) **Shampoos and conditioners**: These are valuable sources of anti-itch, antibacterial and anti-yeast medications. You should first give your pet a bath with regular pet shampoo (oatmeal or moisturizing formula) to remove any dirt and debris. Then apply a generous amount of the medicated shampoo. The key for these shampoos to work is to allow them to soak into the coat for 5-10 minutes prior to rinsing it off repeating it 1-2 times per week.
- 5) **Omega-3 Fatty Acids (EPA) or Fish Oil**: Omega-3 fatty acids is an anti-inflammatory to decrease the amount of inflammation brought on by allergies. Fish oil can be very effective in reducing itchiness and improving the quality of their skin and coat. It may take up to 12 weeks for it to reach high enough levels to make a noticeable difference. If your pet is currently on a food trial, you should avoid using these supplements until after its conclusion.

Allergies have been termed a curse by some, and they are probably not far off. Just ask anyone who has allergies. That is why we like to get to the root of the problem rather than just providing temporary relief. When you decide to perform a food trial, veterinarians rely heavily on you for a successful food trial. I know it is not easy to make sure your pet only eats the new food, especially in multiple animal households. But if you are able keep up with the food trial, and it is a success, your pet will forever thank you. It should be noted, however, that a certain percentage of dogs have both food and environmental allergies. If this is the case, the food trial will only be partially effective and continued allergy therapy will be necessary. If your pet has year round allergies, but it intensifies 1-2 times per year your pet may be in this category.

If you have any questions or concerns, I will be more than happy to discuss them with you.

Dr. Kevin Schmidt  
Patton Veterinary Hospital  
717-246-3611