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Doctor, Why Does My Pet Scratch?

Questions and Answers about Allergies in Animals

What is an allergy?

An Allergy is a disease in which the immune system reacts abnormally to an everyday substance. The severity of reactions can vary. All reactions are unpleasant, some are serious, and a few can be fatal. These hypersensitivity reactions can result from exposure to many common items, such as pollens, animal dander, mold spores, mites, certain foods, and chemicals. The offensive substances causing hypersensitivities are known as allergens. Inhaling, ingesting, or coming into contact with the allergen may induce an allergic reaction.

What are the signs of allergy?

The most common signs in pets are scratching, face rubbing, biting, and chewing. Usual locations for allergic manifestations are the flank, feet, rear, and face, particularly around the eyes, mouth, and ears. In dogs, allergies are often the underlying cause of chronic skin disease. It is important to note that not all scratching is due to allergies. Thyroid conditions and certain infections, such as ringworm, can cause similar symptoms.

How does an animal get allergies?

Some animals genetically inherit the tendency to develop allergies after continued exposure to the offending allergens. The typical allergic pet starts with a short period of itching the first year. With repeated exposures, the animal gradually experiences prolonged periods of discomfort and more severe symptoms. Allergens can become more severe as a pet ages. Allergens that caused minimal reactions as a puppy or kitten may seem to suddenly occur at adulthood, but the truth is the symptoms were just minimal earlier in life.

Do allergies occur only in warm months?

Allergic reactions are more frequent during warmer months. Allergies occur whenever the offending allergens are present. The more common allergens are from plants that pollinate during warm months. An allergy to something continuously present in the environment, such as house dust mites or mold spores, will produce symptoms year-round. A food allergy may be the only allergy problem or it may be present with an inhalant allergy, making testing and clinical history important. Allergic reactions appear as a building block effect. Imagine you are stacking blocks and everything is very stable at first, but as you stack another block and another the likelihood that your tower will fall increases. An allergy to beef may be minimal enough in a pet to not cause signs that

owners notice. But during the spring when fleas also get onto and bite that pet, he may show itchiness. Then once his owner starts cutting the grass, he has an all out allergic reaction that requires medical intervention. Any one of these items by itself may not create signs severe enough for treatment, but compounded in the spring this explains why the condition seems to be seasonal.

Can allergies be prevented?

No, allergies can be controlled but not prevented. The best prevention is avoidance of the offending allergens. This is not always possible, even after the allergens have been identified. Just as every pet is unique, so is its ability to tolerate exposure to various substances.

How do I know if my pet has allergies?

You may suspect that your pet suffers from an allergy, but only your pet's veterinarian can make that determination. A detailed history of your pet's symptoms, which only you can provide, is an important factor in the veterinarian's diagnosis. If your pet's history and physical exam reveal an allergy is likely, your veterinarian may recommend testing to confirm the diagnosis.

What does testing involve?

There are two basic allergy tests: the traditional skin test and a blood test. The results of both tests help identify the cause of your pet's allergies. The skin test involves clipping the hair from an area, injecting small amounts of allergen into 20 to 50 different sites and interpreting the resulting reaction. The **BioMedical Regional Screen** is a blood test specifically designed for allergy testing and requires only a small sample of blood for laboratory analysis. The results of the screen, which indicate the offending allergens, will help your veterinarian determine the best treatment for your pet.

How are allergies treated?

There is no cure for allergies. Consequently, treatment is directed at relieving the symptoms. Your pet's veterinarian will discuss various alternatives with you which include: methods to avoid contact with the offending allergens, topical treatments, drug therapy and immunotherapy. If your pet's veterinarian suggests immunotherapy, it is because it may offer your pet the best opportunity for relief without continued steroid use. Prolonged steroid therapy reduces itching, but produces serious side effects which can decrease the quality and length of your pet's life.

What is immunotherapy?

As the name suggests, it is a therapy which works to increase the immune system's tolerance of allergens. The principle is similar to the reason distemper and rabies vaccinations protect your pet from these diseases. Injections of extracts of the same allergens to which your pet is allergic stimulate the immune system to produce antibodies that bind to the allergens. These antibodies block the start of an allergic reaction. Before your pet's treatment can be formulated, the allergens causing your pet's condition must be identified through testing. Extracts of the offending allergens are then included in your pet's customized treatment set. While immunotherapy is not a

cure, it may provide long periods of relief without causing the problems associated with long-term steroid use.

Will this therapy work for my pet?

Immunotherapy has been used for many years in both human and veterinary medicine. Your pet's chances for a good response to therapy depend on three basic factors, all of which are determined before the start of therapy. 1). Therapy must be directed at all of your pet's allergies. Poor response is most likely due to incomplete discovery of all of the allergens that are causing the problems and, subsequently, incomplete treatment. If a food allergy has not already been ruled out, it should be considered. Any changes in the pet's environment must also be evaluated. 2). Your pet must have both an active and healthy immune system. 3). Your pet must otherwise be in good health, which gives the body the extra edge it may need for successful therapy.

If all these factors are in your pet's favor, the chance of having a positive response to therapy is very good. Maintaining the response will depend on you, the owner, adhering to the injection schedule set up by the veterinarian.

How long will it take to see results?

Most patients require 3 to 4 months of therapy; however, in a few patients, some improvement may be seen sooner.

Immunotherapy takes time. Your pet must develop blocking antibodies which in turn will help alleviate symptoms. Maximum benefit may not be realized for as long as one year.

The **BioMedical immuno-efficacy** assay is a simple blood test to measure the "blocking antibodies" your pet is developing. Your veterinarian can use this information to adjust your pet's treatment regimen, if necessary.

Is immunotherapy a long-term solution?

The symptoms of allergies do improve over time with treatment. However, in most cases, continued treatment is needed to allow the pet to lead a normal, symptom-free life. There are many kinds of medications that may help in the short-term, but the only two long-term remedies are the elimination of offending substances or having the body build its own protection through immunotherapy. With **BioMedical Treatment Sets**, your pet's symptoms may be controlled, thus providing the best possible relief. Immunotherapy allows your pet to live more comfortably within its existing surroundings.

Is treatment expensive?

The cost of immunotherapy is comparable to your current treatment expenses. The initial diagnostic testing is equivalent in cost to other types of lab work, and should be viewed as a wise investment in your pet's future, particularly given the possible detrimental effects of continuous steroid therapy.

Will it harm my pet?

The most common adverse reaction is a temporary increase in itchiness. If this reaction

occurs, it usually arises during the first few months of treatment. Antihistamines may be prescribed to alleviate the allergies; the therapy dose may need adjustment.

Adverse reactions are possible, but serious problems very rarely occur. The benefits of immunotherapy can far outweigh the risks.

When should testing and treatment begin?

Treatment is always easier for the patient during its "off season," when the offending allergens are at the lowest levels. However, treatment can be started at any time.

Remember that it takes several months to develop tolerance to the offending allergens.

Testing is best done when the pet is not receiving steroid medications. The **BioMedical** Regional Screen is much less sensitive to steroid interference than the skin test. Your pet's veterinarian will recommend the best procedure to follow.

Updated/Revised 12/2012