Management and therapy guide for cats and dogs with allergies

In this blog, we will look at how allergy can affect your pet, with a focus on the different ways you can help with the management of this complicated condition.

**KEY WORDS:**

**Allergen** – a normally harmless substance which causes the immune system of allergic pets to produce an abnormal response

**Allergy** – an overreaction by your pet’s immune system resulting in the over production of antibodies and ultimately the occurrence of symptoms

The ‘allergic threshold’ is a term used to describe the point at which you start to see the symptoms associated with allergy, for example itching. How quickly this threshold is reached will vary between pets. For some, one single allergen, perhaps exposure to dandelions or dust mites, may be enough to push that particular cat or dog over its threshold. For another cat or dog, it may be the accumulative effect of multiple allergens that push them above the allergy threshold, resulting in the symptoms you see.

For this reason, it is really important that as many allergens as possible are identified and addressed, with the aim of bringing your pet as far under its threshold as possible. This helps to decrease symptoms and reduce the risk of flare ups. The dog labelled 4 demonstrates why only managing part of the problem would leave some pets still showing symptoms. It’s also important to understand that pets with allergies will always be prone to flare ups, as they will be closer to the threshold than a normal animal. Secondary bacterial and yeast infections, or being exposed to any fleas, lice or mites, could all trigger symptoms to re-occur, so need to be checked for regularly and preventative treatment used as appropriate.
Allergen avoidance

Environmental allergy – there are lots of ways you can help reduce exposure to environmental allergens. Below is a list of handy tips:

Grasses and weeds:
- Keep lawns mown and weed free
- Exercise your pet on well-cut paths and pavements; avoiding areas with long flowering grasses and/or weeds
- Regularly groom, wipe over with a damp cloth or rinse your pet off with water, especially after exposure to long grass and/or weeds
- Keep your pet indoors when grass is being cut in the area
- Check weather reports for the pollen count and, if possible, stay indoors when it’s high
- Wash and change your clothes after you’ve been outside to wash pollen off
- Avoid grassy areas, such as parks and fields, when the pollen count is highest
- Keep windows and doors shut as much as possible
- Do not keep fresh flowers in the house
- Try not to dry clothes outside – they can catch pollen
- Humans carry pollens too – try keeping outdoor clothes and shoes in a separate area

Trees:
- Keep hedges well cut to avoid flowering
- Avoid exercise routes that pass by or through wooded areas

Mites:
Storage mites often live in the dusty residue of dried dog food, house dust mites live in soft fabrics and furnishings within the home.
- Purchase only small bags of pet food rather than large bags to ensure fresher batches are fed
- Empty dry food from its original packaging into resealable containers, discarding the dust at the bottom of the bag, or alternatively, use wet food
- Wipe your pet’s face with a damp cloth when it has finished feeding to remove food residues
- Avoid excess cushions and throws on the furniture
- Avoid a build up of dust in the home
- Vacuum your carpet and dry-clean curtains and upholstery regularly
- Regularly either wash your pet’s stuffed toys at hot temperatures, or freeze them for 24 hours and then wash at a lower setting
- Avoid letting your pet sleep in your bedroom, especially on your bed

Moulds:
- Keep bathrooms and areas where laundry is done well ventilated
- Check food sources for signs of mould or rot, especially on fruit and vegetables
- Treat any damp walls with a mould inhibitor
- Avoid heavy vegetation around or over the house, e.g. ivy and other climbing plants
- Keep the garden free of fallen leaves and other garden debris
- Ensure compost heap is well covered and restrict your pet’s access
- Keep all pet beds, coats etc in a dry environment and keep clean
Food allergy

To diagnose a food allergy something called a food trial is done. This is where the normal diet is changed to a minimal number of foods, which are not thought to be likely to be contributing to the problem, to see if the symptoms improve. A ‘gold standard’ food trial would involve feeding a home prepared diet with limited ingredients, which ideally includes just a single protein and single carbohydrate source that have not previously been fed. A blood test (serological testing) can assist in selecting the most appropriate foods for a trial. All supplements, treats and flavoured medications should also be avoided if possible. The trial should be conducted until there is an improvement, which may take 6-8 weeks to occur. If the symptoms do improve then the original diet should be reintroduced to see if it causes a recurrence of the symptoms, otherwise the improvement could just have been a coincidence. A relapse will confirm a diagnosis of food allergy. Individual problem foods should then ideally be identified, so these can be completely eliminated from the diet permanently.

Combined Therapeutic Approach

Tackling allergy from every angle provides the best chance of long-term success and reduces the risk of flare-ups.

Improving skin and coat hygiene

Routine use of topical products such as shampoos, sprays or wipes can help keep bacteria and yeast under control and reduce itch.

Controlling secondary infections and infestations

Fleas, mites and lice can all contribute to skin problems so all year round protection is vital. Spotting skin infections early can help get the skin back under control quicker.

Controlling the primary disease

Most pets will also require regular injections and/or oral medications (foundation therapies) to control the allergy and help prevent flare-ups. These may need to be given in combination, especially just after diagnosis or to control a flare-up.

Allergen avoidance measures

Avoiding the problem allergens, or reducing exposure to them, is often possible. Both our website, and the results pack provided after allergy testing with us, have detailed guidance for individual allergens.

Repairing the skin barrier

Certain topical products, foods and oral supplements contain ingredients such as essential fatty acids, which support the skin barrier and help prevent flare-ups.

Allergy is a lifelong condition with no quick fix. Treatment often requires a multi-modal approach which may include environmental control, topical and systemic therapy, and allergen specific immunotherapy.

If you would like to find out more about allergies in pets, please have a look at our website www.avactaanimalhealth.com/pet-home