

Talk about being in a rut. In the past few weeks I've been spending a lot of time talking with pet owners about allergy. If my case-load is any indication, a lot Vallejo area pets must be suffering from runny eyes, itchy skin and ear infections, not to mention keeping their owners up at night with their continuous scratching, licking, and chewing. Even so, pet owners will still occasionally give me a look of disbelief when I suggest their pet may have allergies.

The problem with calling something an allergy is that people often think it's just a catch-all phrase for everything we medical-types can't explain. I can understand why one might think that. Dog is itchy-likely an allergy. Dog is licking her feet-probably allergy. Dog is coughing-could be allergy. Dog is vomiting-may be an allergy. Ear infection-again, possible allergy. What gives? Is allergy the cause of all medical problems in dogs? Hardly, but the fact remains it is a very common problem with many different symptoms depending on the type of allergy and the age and breed of the patient. Fortunately, allergy usually results in only mild problems, but for some pets it can make their life quite miserable.

The term "allergy" is a general term that is used to describe an individual's intolerance to something in its environment. At the core of the problem is the immune system...yes the same system that protects, can also cause a host of problems.

In very simple terms allergy is the immune system's way of saying it doesn't like certain environmental products. These "products" run the gamut from pollens, dust and molds to dietary ingredients, vaccines, medications, and even insect venom. Equally as universal is the spectrum of symptoms seen in our allergic pets. Itchy skin, runny eyes are common symptoms but I'll also see serious skin and ear infections, as well as respiratory and gastrointestinal disease caused by allergies.

So how can you tell if your pet suffers from allergies? Let's categorize allergy into 3 rather unscientific groups: fleabite allergy, Atopy ("hay-fever"-like allergy), and "all the rest" (food, contact, drug/chemical allergy). This is a handy way to think of allergies in pets because it also puts them in order of decreasing frequency.

Fleabite allergy is probably the easiest allergy to recognize. If your dog is itchy (i.e., scratching, chewing, gnawing his skin) in the back half of his body, he probably has flea allergy. Even if you've searched high and low and can't find a single flea, I'd still bet lunch he has fleabite allergy. Frankly, you don't need a veterinarian to diagnose fleabite allergy. The important point here is location of the itchiness. Veterinarians will often use the distribution of your pet's itchiness and skin problems to help arrive at a diagnosis. Remember that the flea allergic dog is typically itchy in the back half of the body, specifically, the lower back, tail-base, groin, and back of the legs. The flea allergic dog only needs an occasional fleabite to remain constantly itchy. Proteins in the flea "saliva" are what cause the intense allergy seen in so many dogs. So the apparent absence of fleas on a patient rarely deters me from diagnosing flea allergy; though finding a flea on the dog does help convince the doubting pet-owner.

"Hay fever"-like allergies are second only to flea allergy as the most common cause of itchy skin in dogs. Atopy is the more accurate term and refers to allergies to agents in the pet's environment. Often these agents gain access to the pet via the respiratory tract. Pollens, mold spores, and house dust are just a few of the nearly limitless number of environmental products (often called allergens) that can induce allergy in our pets. As you might expect, Atopy tends to be a seasonal problem with the spring, summer, and fall seasons being the most challenging. A smaller percentage of pets will exhibit atopic allergies in the winter or even year round. Unlike flea allergy, Atopy can present in many varied forms. Nonetheless there are some common symptoms to look for. I believe the most common sign of Atopy is licking or chewing at the feet, especially the front feet. Facial itchiness with redness and sometimes hair-loss around the eyes and mouth is also common. The ears seem to be particularly problematic in atopic dogs. In some dogs ear itchiness or full blown ear infections may be their only symptom of Atopy. Some dogs will scratch or chew their armpit areas causing redness, and with time, pigmentation of the skin. Just so allergic people know they have something in common with their allergic pet, some atopic dogs will have runny, red, and puffy eyes but these concerns are not nearly as common as the skin problems seen. Veterinary dermatologists will use a variety of tests to confirm a diagnosis of Atopy. These tests might include intradermal skin testing so often used in human dermatology. I find that only the most severely affected pets need to be seen by a veterinary dermatologist. Your veterinarian can help your allergic pet with various medications, but every atopic pet is different, so you may need to patiently work through various treatment modalities to find the most effective approach.

While flea allergy and Atopy make up most of the allergy problems we see, there is an occasional case of food, drug, bug bite, or contact allergy seen. While infrequent, these forms of allergies can have some very striking and even life threatening symptoms. Problems can range from vomiting and diarrhea to marked swelling of the face; even life threatening anaphylactic reactions are possible, but thankfully rare. If at any time you suspect your pet is reacting to a new medicine, vaccine, food, or bug bite seek veterinary care immediately.

I often counsel people with allergic pets that we're not likely to "cure" their pet's allergy problem. But like allergic people, with careful attention to what products and agents they're exposed to and the judicious use of medications we can usually help control the symptoms-at least until the next allergy season.

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