

“Seasonal Allergies in Our Pets”

One of the dedicated nurses in our office has terrible allergies. I’m not sure if it’s the animals she’s exposed to all day or just the season, but you can always tell if she’s working a given shift by just listening for her sneezing. While animals may be a common cause of allergies in people, many folks are surprised to learn that pets can be on the receiving end of allergies as well. In fact, veterinarians (like medical doctors, I suspect) spend a fair amount of their day dealing with allergies in their patients.

Allergy is just one way our immune system responds to foreign substances. In most cases these foreign substances (allergens) are airborne and gain access to our system via the respiratory tract. Other routes of access may be the gastrointestinal tract (food allergy) and injection (bee sting reaction, flea allergy, injectable drug reaction). Whatever the route, these allergens, or should I say our immune system’s response to these allergens, can make our life miserable. The same is true for our pets.

We all know the common symptoms of allergy in people: sneezing, runny eyes, nasal congestion, and sinus pressure. While these may occur to some degree, we don’t believe these classic “human” symptoms of allergies are very common in our pets (how do you tell if a dog has increased sinus pressure anyway?). More likely, allergic pets will have itchy feet, itchy ears (or outright ear infections), itchy armpits, and itchy face/eyes. Oh, and did I mention that allergic pets are itchy? There’s no question, when it comes to airborne allergies, the skin is the primary “allergy organ” of dogs and cats. It’s usually not a general “all over” itchiness, but rather itchiness in the front half of the body (face, ears, eyes, front feet, etc.) Another very common kind of allergy is flea allergy, which tends to cause itchiness in the back half of the body. We’ll talk about flea allergy in another column later this spring.

Even though the symptoms of airborne allergy can be very different in humans and animals the treatment is actually quite similar. Avoidance is the best. If we can identify the offending allergen (pollen, house dust, fungal spores, or whatever) then we try to avoid it. This, of course, is next to impossible because airborne allergens are... well, in the air.

The next option is to use drugs to block the allergic response. Histamine is one of the many natural chemical mediators of allergy in the body, so it should come as no surprise that drugs that block histamine action (anti-histamines) can help the allergic patient. Antihistamine drugs are effective in many pets, but not all. One word of caution though, always check with your pet’s doctor before giving any allergy medication (prescription or over-the-counter) to your pet.

In some very severe allergy patients we need the help of a veterinary dermatologist. Yes, there are veterinary dermatologists. In fact there are several practicing in the Bay Area, as well as the Dermatology Service at the School of Veterinary Medicine at UC Davis.

A veterinary dermatologist can help identify the offending allergen using a specialized test called “Intra-dermal skin testing” (those of you that have severe allergies yourself might know about this test). Tiny amounts of various allergens are injected into the superficial layer of the skin (dermis) and the area is observed for signs of a reaction. Sometimes blood tests are used as well to better understand the allergic patient’s

sensitivities. Once we know what a patient is allergic to we can develop a program of injections to help reduce the allergic response. This method of allergy diagnosis and treatment, while successful in about seventy percent of patients, is a bit more expensive than conventional antihistamine treatment. Again, it is usually reserved for the most severely affected animals.

So in the next few weeks when your eyes start to get red, you're sneezing becomes a constant daily challenge, and you're so congested you wonder if you'll ever breath through your nose again, take a look at your pet. He may be just as miserable as you. Only instead of wiping his nose with a tissue he'll be licking and chewing at his itchy feet. You both may need a trip to the doctor.

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