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## WHAT IS ALLERGY?

Allergy is a disease in which the immune system reacts

abnormally to everyday substances such as pollens,

animal danders, mold spores, mites, certain foods and

chemicals. All of these allergic reactions are unpleasant,

some are serious, and a few can be fatal. The offensive

substances causing allergies are known as allergens.

An allergic reaction may be caused by inhaling or

ingesting the allergen or may be the result of direct

contact with the allergen.

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF ALLERGY?

The most common signs of allergy in pets are scratching, face rubbing and biting and chewing at the skin. Usual locations for signs of allergy are the flank, feet, face, particularly around the eyes, mouth and ears, as well as areas around the base of the tail. In dogs, allergies are often the underlying cause of persistent skin disease, however, it is important to note that not all scratching is due to allergy. Conditions such as thyroid disease, fleas and certain infections, such as ringworm, can cause similar signs.

## HOW DO DOGS GET ALLERGIES?

All dogs with allergies inherit the tendency to develop allergies from their parents. After continued exposure to the offending allergens for months to years, the signs of allergy become apparent in the pet. The typical allergic pet starts with a short period of biting and chewing the first year which may be mild or perhaps unnoticeable. With repeated exposures to the offending allergens, the pet gradually experiences prolonged periods of discomfort and more severe signs.

## WHEN ARE ALLERGIES MOST LIKELY TO OCCUR?

Allergies occur whenever the offending allergens are present. The more common allergens such as house dust mites or mold spores will produce signs of allergy year round, while allergies from plants that pollinate during warm months are apt to cause allergies only when they pollinate. Food allergy may occur by itself or it may be a component of an overall allergy problem. Because of the complexity of allergy diagnosis, the combination of patient history, physical examination and allergy signs in the pet are all important in making an accurate diagnosis.

## CAN ALLERGIES BE PREVENTED?

Since allergies are inherited, there is no absolute way to prevent them. It is therefore generally accepted that allergies can be controlled but not prevented. The best control is achieved through avoidance of the offending allergens, so if, for example, your pet is allergic to fleas, it is better to prevent flea infestation. However, allergens like molds and mites are virtually impossible to avoid, resulting in the need for alternative allergy treatments.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF MY PET HAS ALLERGIES?

If your pet is persistently chewing its feet or scratching at its face, allergy may be a possible cause. Unfortunately, there are no specific signs for allergy so you will need to rely on your pet's veterinarian to make that determination. Allergy diagnosis requires eliminating other causes for your pet's clinical signs. This involves taking a detailed history of your pet's problems, a complete physical examination and some preliminary laboratory tests. If your pet's history and physical examination suggest that an allergy is likely, your veterinarian may recommend allergy testing to confirm the diagnosis.

## HOW ARE ALLERGIES TREATED?

There are a number of different ways or combinations of ways to treat allergies. If the allergy is mild, control may be achieved through the use of methods to avoid contact with the offending allergens and medications to control the clinical signs. In pets with more severe allergies, or in pets where allergies occur year round, specific allergy treatments such as immunotherapy (allergy shots) may be needed. Immunotherapy is often recommended because prolonged use of certain medications, especially steroids, reduces itching, but produces serious side-effects which may decrease the quality and length of your pet's life. Your pet's veterinarian will discuss various alternative treatments with you based on your needs and the needs of your pet.