



ALLERGIES IN CATS

WHAT IS AN ALLERGY?

Allergies are by far the most frequent cause of skin irritation in cats. Allergic itches can be difficult to diagnose and frustrating to treat, and require persistence and patience from everyone involved. They will often require life-long management, and a satisfactory degree of relief is attainable for most cats through close management.

Prior to being able to diagnose and treat the itchy cat, other causes of the itchiness must be ruled out. Tests needed may include skin scrapings looking for mites, fungal cultures for "Ringworm", and in some circumstances, blood tests to rule out hormonal imbalance.

Cats will often show signs of allergies within the first two years of life, but it is also possible for them to surface later in life. Many cats suffer from more than one type of allergy. There is an "itch threshold", meaning that a mildly allergic cat could require a few allergies being stimulated at once before signs of itchiness appear, whereas a highly allergic cat may require only one small stimulus to set them off. Itchiness will usually be exacerbated when other environmental and skin-related factors are occurring together with the allergy-causing factors. These aggravating factors include stress, anxiety, boredom, dry skin, bacterial and fungal infections, humidity, sweating and breaks in the skin.

If they begin to scratch, they can cause skin wounds and infections due to self-trauma.

There are four types of allergies. A good history and basic clinical examination can help determine which type of allergy your cat may suffer from.

It is important to note that many cats suffer from more than one type of the above allergies. To complicate matters further, allergies tend to be additive, eg, the presence of fleas may push a normally sub-clinical atopic cat over the "itchy threshold".

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF FLEA ALLERGIES?

This is a very common allergy caused by a hypersensitivity to flea saliva. This means that even one flea bite can initiate significant itch and inflammation. This inflammatory reaction may last up to 2 weeks after the flea bite. This is why it is possible that your cat may be suffering from a flea allergy, even though you cannot see any fleas!

Cats with flea allergy tend to be particularly itchy around the base of the tail, around the bottom, and on the inner thighs. They may exhibit hair loss in these areas as well as reddening of the skin, rashes and crusts. "Hotspots" also may develop due to self-trauma and infecting the skin with their normal mouth and nail bacteria. These changes are known as flea allergy dermatitis and tend to have a seasonal pattern, November-March being the typical time of year. Outbreaks can occur during winter if the weather is unusually humid.

Flea allergies are definitively diagnosed based on resolution of signs after a flea elimination trial is implemented (see the "management" section below).

WHAT IS ATOPY?

Atopy is very common and involves allergies to a vast range of airborne allergens. These include pollens, grasses, flowers, moulds, tobacco and dust mites.

Atopic cats tend to have an itchy face, paws, groin and armpits. This is manifested by rubbing, scratching, licking and chewing these areas. Again, skin changes include redness, rashes and crusting. Recurrent ear infections are also a feature. Atopic dermatitis tends to be seasonal, depending on what the allergens are. Dust mite allergens are very common and will occur all year round.

Atopy is definitively diagnosed by a skin test performed under sedation by a veterinary dermatologist or a blood test done by a general practitioner. Both of these will eliminate the most common airborne allergens, as well as stating to what degree of hypersensitivity your cat is to each major allergen. For these tests to be performed there needs to be a high level of suspicion that your cat is atopic as they are fairly involved and expensive compared to other simpler tests. These tests are usually performed with a view to making up "allergy vaccines" that are specially formulated for each patient and aim to desensitize them to the particular allergens they are hypersensitive to over the period of around one year. The tests can also be done in order to simply have the knowledge of what your cat should try to avoid.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF A FOOD ALLERGY?

Food allergies are actually quite rare, but are more common in some breeds such as the longhaired orientals. Cats usually will develop a hypersensitivity to a specific large sized protein. Red meats are most commonly the cause, but smaller meat proteins such as chicken and fish can also incite allergic responses. Much more occasionally, cats can develop allergies to wheat, dairy products, colourings, preservatives and other foods. Allergies may develop any time in your cat's life, and they may even have been fine on the same diet for a couple of years before a hypersensitivity reaction is seen. Cats with a food allergy tend to itch and develop skin lesions in the same areas as atopic cats. A notable difference is that the food allergy dermatitis tends NOT to be seasonal.

Food allergies are definitively diagnosed by a Diet Elimination Trial. Skin tests and blood tests are currently very unreliable for diagnosing a food allergy. Your veterinarian will recommend a specific food for a trial. It is imperative that you be very strict with this diet and do not feed other foods AT ALL. This includes flavoured worming tablets and other liver flavoured medications. Please check with your veterinarian on the best way to avoid these medications during the food trial.

WHAT IS A CONTACT ALLERGY?

Contact allergies are quite common. Cats may be allergic to a variety of materials or plants. Some of these are dandelions, some wood and man-made surfaces, nickel, cobalt, rubbers, resins, cleaning products, synthetic textiles, plastics, fragrances and even some topical creams.

A feature of contact allergy is that the irritation and resulting dermatitis must occur on less hairy skin only, eg, the belly and chin.

Contact allergies are definitively diagnosed by skin patch testing, carried out by a veterinary dermatologist.



MANAGEMENT OF ALLERGIES IN CATS

FLEA ALLERGY THERAPY

This involves treating your cat, and other pets AND the environment for fleas.

Only 5% of flea population are found on your cat (as adults) while the rest are found in the environment (BOTH inside and outside areas are possible) as immature forms.

There are many adulticides and those that prevent the flea life cycle available – some good and some are not so helpful. Whichever one you choose must be strictly followed.

Advantage is the easiest and most effective flea treatment. The mouthparts of the flea are paralysed within 5 minutes, then the fleas die within 24 hours when they jump onto the cat. It is to be used monthly or every 3 weeks.

Advocate and Revolution are monthly flea controls that includes a heartworm and gastrointestinal worming component for long term use.

Capstar are tablets that kill adult fleas within 24 hours but only work for one day. These may be used in addition to the above flea control when you see many adult fleas while the above flea-sterilising treatment is working.

Program is a 6 monthly injection that may or may not be appropriate.

Your vet will establish the most appropriate product protocol for your cat.

DO NOT USE ADVANTIX, PERMOXIN OR OTHER PYRETHRIN SPRAYS OR TOPSPOTS AS THEY ARE TOXIC TO CATS. CHECK THE LABEL IF BUYING ANYTHING FROM THE SUPERMARKET.

Treatment of your environment is achieved by two steps:

Firstly, by putting all the cats/cats in the household onto year round flea control products.

Secondly, by flea bombing the house during an infestation, washing bedding in bleach and vacuuming or steam cleaning carpets. Please note that some flea eggs will hatch with steam cleaning and thus a flea bomb post steam cleaning is recommended.

The most effective way of doing this is to bomb the house and SPRAY inaccessible areas at the same time. The trick is then to re-spray those same areas in 3 weeks time. Good bomb/spray products available from the supermarket include Black Mortein and Purple Raid.

If you choose to spray, be VERY careful that your cat cannot get to the sprayed areas as the products are likely to be toxic to your cat. They also need to be away from the environment during a bombing for at least 8 hours, if not overnight.

ATOPY THERAPY

This is generally seen as a frustrating allergy to manage, as we cannot control the amount of pollen etc that is in the air.

However, if your cat is skin tested and the offending allergens determined, specific vaccines will be manufactured especially to desensitize them to that allergen. These must be ordered from a skin specialist and are quite costly. The injection course usually lasts around 12 months and are once month.

Otherwise, management is about relieving the symptoms with the over-the counter medications that follow often, and the prescription only-the-counter medications (ie prednisolone and other corticosteroids) not too often.

FOOD ALLERGY THERAPY

This is easy once the offending food components have been identified, however it may take a long time to ascertain the cause as it is by trial and error.

A proper food elimination trial needs to be performed – this usually Once a foodstuff is discovered after a successful food elimination trial (requires discipline!), that food is never fed to your cat again. Once the veterinarian has recommended a particular food trial, ONLY that food plus water is allowed to pass your dog's lips for the next 4 weeks,

which means no bones, treats, scraps or anything else!

CONTACT ALLERGY THERAPY

This is tricky.

Firstly attempt to remove any Wandering Jew or other weeds from your property. A trial with restricted access to certain areas, or with body coverings, eg, babysuits, may help identify the problem area. This is easier with indoor cats as access to areas where an allergen is located is able to be denied.

OVER-THE-COUNTER MANAGEMENT

Provide excellent flea control anyway. Remember the fleas can exacerbate other allergies and since fleas are simply eradicated, this is a good starting point.

Omega 3 essential fatty acid supplementation. This is known as a “neutraceutical”, aimed at reducing itch. It does not work in all cats but as there are no major side-effects, it is worth a try. As this is a fat, there may be initial diarrhoea so it may be a good idea to start dosing gradually to avoid this. The dose of omega 3's is 1000mg per 10kg of body weight – ie 500-1000mg for the average cat. Another alternative is fish meals at least 2-3 times per week of the omega-3 rich fish eg salmon, sardines etc. Most cats do not have fish allergies.

A good quality, emolient shampoo if dandruff/dry skin is a problem. These are important for their soothing properties. Many supermarket shampoos and flea shampoos contain detergents and strip the coat and skin leading to irritation. Human shampoos are not appropriate for cats as canine skin is quite different from human skin. Some excellent products includes “Aloveen” and “Allergroom”.

Antihistamines. These are very safe with minor sedation being the only major side-effect in only some of the brands. Different antihistamines have varying efficacy in individual cats and as a result their success is reducing itch is inconsistent. Therefore a trial period of 1-2 weeks is necessary to test different antihistamines.

VETERINARY MANAGEMENT

When the itch is uncontrollable via over-the-counter medications, please book a consultation with a veterinarian for further therapy, such as sprays, creams, antibiotics and occasionally prednisolone or other corticosteroids.

