Food Allergy in Dogs and Cats

A food allergy is a reaction to food that involves the body's immune system. Typically, a protein or carbohydrate particle in the food is the culprit. Your pet may itch, lick or chew different areas of the body as a response to the allergy inflammation. You may notice pronounced itching in the paws, flank, groin, neck or ears. The itching can occur all seasons. Many pets may have chronic ear infections and anal gland problems caused by food allergies. A dietary allergy predisposes dogs and cats to secondary bacterial and yeast infections of the skin and ears. Gastrointestinal signs such as repeated vomiting, diarrhea, belching, excessive gas and unusually frequent bowel movements can also be signs of allergic reactions. Food allergy pets often have both varying degrees of skin problems and gastrointestinal issues.

How do we address food allergies?
The most effective way to address a food allergy is through a careful change in diet. The diets we select contain a “novel” protein source, meaning that your pet has not eaten these ingredients. Switching to another commercial dog or cat food is an ineffective test because most foods contain similar ingredients.

While there are blood tests marketed for food allergy detection in pets, these tests are not accurate or reliable for the selection of an appropriate diet for your pet.

Prescription dry and canned diets as well as home cooked diets are available for food allergy patients.

• The ideal way to complete a food trial is home cooking because it eliminates the possibility of a food preservative allergy.

Guidelines for a successful food trial

During the diet trial, your pet is NOT allowed to have any traditional treats, rawhide chews, biscuits, scraps or supplements of any kind. This includes joint supplements and chewable vitamins.

If your pet eats even one bite of a food that he or she is allergic to, their symptoms may persist. If your dog is unrelenting in its begging, an acceptable treat is fruits and vegetables (except for grapes, raisins and corn, including popcorn).

• Medications should not be administered in bread, cheese, peanut butter, lunch meat, pill pockets, etc.

Introducing the new diet

The new diet should be gradually introduced, initially mixing equal quantities with your pet's traditional diet over two days to prevent stomach upset. Nylabones and rawhides your dog may enjoy may be replaced with deer antlers and sweet potato chews if approved by your veterinarian. Other hypoallergenic treats are available at MedVet. Please make sure all food bowls and containers are cleaned with soap and water before beginning the new diet. Please ensure that all family pets are separated at feeding time.

Duration of new diet

Immediate results should not be expected. It typically takes a month to see significant improvement, but it may take considerably longer. After this period of time, if the itch is controlled, the food allergy may be documented by challenging your pet with the old diet to see if the signs recur. If the signs recur, your pet is allergic to one or more ingredients in the old diet.

Acceptable Treats for Your Allergic Pet
• Fruits, except grapes or raisins
• Vegetables, except corn
• The new Hypoallergenic food placed in a treat jar
• The new Hypoallergenic food frozen in ice cube trays

Ingredients to be Avoided During a Food Trial
• Wheat
• Beef
• Chicken and Egg
• Soy
• Milk and Dairy
• Turkey
Duration of new diet cont.

- The options are to feed your pet the hypoallergenic diet lifelong, or to feed it temporarily while we pinpoint the specific ingredient your pet is allergic to. This is done by adding a single different ingredient (soy, milk, wheat, beef, etc.) to the diet every two weeks and using the information gained to select a commercial diet without the offending ingredient. Your veterinary dermatologist will assist you during this process.

Food trials take time. Improvements in your pet's condition will not be immediate.

Tip: Take photographs of your pet's skin before you start the trial and then biweekly to monitor progress. A trial can take up to 16 weeks, so patience is important!

Common food trial pitfalls

Allowing ANYONE to feed your pet snacks or chew toys with flavoring can affect the food trial. Make sure that all visitors and relatives are aware that your pet is on a strict diet and that no snacks are allowed.

Tip: Fruit and vegetable snacks, with the exception of grapes, raisins and corn may be offered.

Flavored supplements of any kind or flavored medications/antibiotics can disrupt the food trial.

Tip: Replace all flavored supplements with non-flavored pills, a topical, or an injection. Be sure to ask your veterinary dermatologist before giving any supplements or medications during a food allergy trial.

Most food allergy patients are allergic to 3-4 ingredients. Therefore, it is important to reassess your pet's response with your MedVet doctor as the diet may need additional adjustment.

Tip: Schedule your re-evaluation appointment before you leave so timely diet adjustments can be recommended, if needed.