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ALLERGIC SKIN DISEASE

OUR GUIDE TO BEATING THIS COMMON AND DISTRESSING DISORDER



If your dog or cat has an on-going itchy skin problem, recurrent skin rashes/infections or ear infections, and common causes such as flea infestation have been ruled out, then it could well be that your pet has allergic skin disease (often referred to as 'eczema' in people).

This means that your pet's immune system is responding in an inappropriate and excessive way to non-harmful elements in their environment and/or diet. This immune response causes the skin to be itchy and the resulting self-trauma caused by your pet scratching will allow bacterial and fungal skin infections to occur. These infections will then exacerbate the original itchiness. Treating the infections (with antibiotics, creams or shampoos) will go some way towards relieving the symptoms but the ultimate goal is to reduce the allergic burden or suppress the immune system's response to the trigger elements.

Commonly, an animal with allergies will be allergic to many different elements or "allergens". If exposed to a small number of these allergens then symptoms may not be noticed. However, the effects of different allergens in the environment and/or diet are cumulative and once your pet is exposed to sufficient allergens, the "pruritic threshold" will be reached i.e. your pet will become itchy. This means that the fewer

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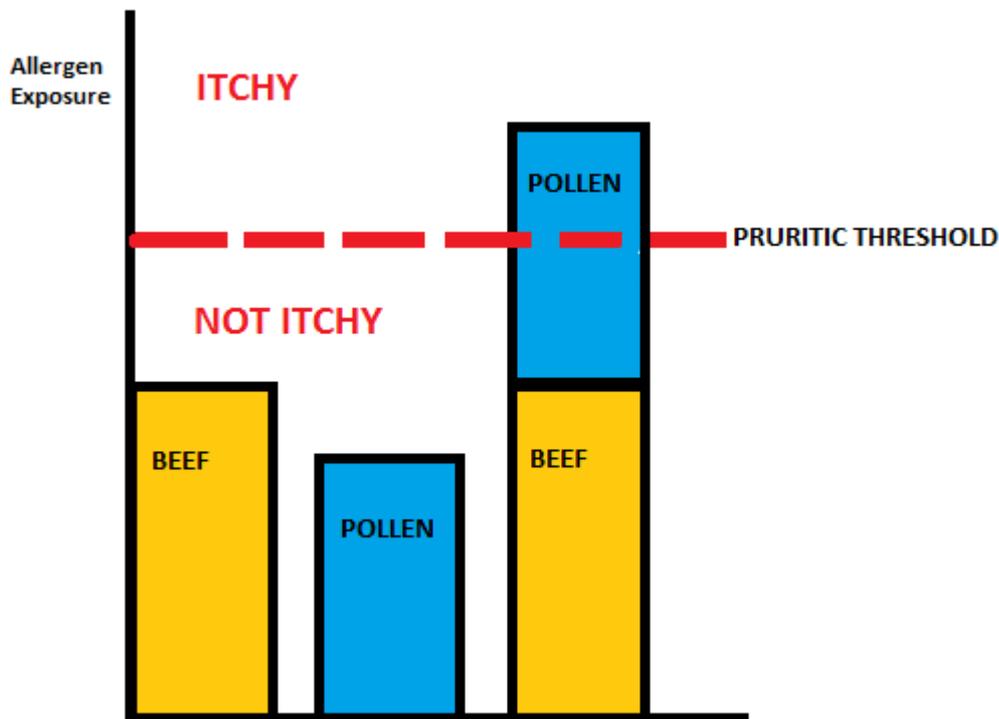
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allergens your pet is exposed to, or the fewer allergens that they react to, the less likely they are to reach the pruritic threshold the less likely they are to become itchy.

Pruritic threshold diagram



In order to achieve a reduced exposure or response, we must first ascertain which allergens your pet is allergic to. This can be done by means of elimination (e.g. diet trials, changing washing powders/bedding etc and assessing response), intradermal skin testing or (most quickly and simply) blood testing. Once we are aware of the responsible allergens we can develop a plan to tackle your pet's allergies:

1. **Eliminate** the allergens from your pet's diet or environment - this is not always possible for example if your pet is allergic to grasses or pollens.

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2. **Hyposensitise** your pet. This is done by injecting small amounts of the responsible allergens on a regular basis, thereby getting your pet's immune system used to these allergens so the response is reduced.
3. **Modify the immune system's response** to the allergens. Going back to our diagram, this effectively raises the bar/threshold at which your pet becomes itchy so they can tolerate higher amounts of the allergens without becoming itchy. Immune-modifying medications which do this include ciclosporin, oclacitinib (Apoquel), steroids and antihistamines, which may be used on their own or in combination.
4. **Improve the skin's barrier** to the allergens. Certain supplements containing the essential fatty acids DHA and EPA as well as biotin, vitamin E and zinc may be useful to enhance the resistance of the skin and thus raise the threshold higher. Ask us about Nutramega, fortified salmon oil and other skin support supplements.
5. **Monitor and treat any secondary bacterial or fungal infections** with appropriate medication, shampoos and sprays to prevent these agents worsening your pet's symptoms.

It is important to appreciate from the outset that allergic skin disease is not a problem that can be cured, but, it can be managed very effectively using the above methods. It is also important to realise that the disease is multifactorial and will often require a multi-pronged approach with a combination of strategies. Reducing exposure to as many allergens as possible will reduce the likelihood of your pet reaching their pruritic threshold and becoming itchy/ succumbing to skin infections. We can discuss ways in which this can be achieved and help you minimise the amount of long-term medication that your pet needs to keep their symptoms under control.

However even without allergy testing, which can be prohibitively expensive for some people without pet insurance, we can still attempt diet trials and utilise steps 3, 4 and 5 above to find a manageable and affordable way to minimise the impact of your pet's allergy so that your pet can enjoy a life free from the chronic pain and discomfort of allergic skin disease.

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