



ALLERGY TESTING - WHAT IS IT AND HOW MIGHT IT HELP MY PET?

Your pet may have been advised to have a blood test to see whether they are allergic to certain substances in their food or in the environment (such as grasses, pollens, mites etc). This is done by looking for excessive levels of certain types of antibodies that are known to stimulate an allergic response (known as IgE) which suggests that the immune system is reacting excessively to these substances or 'allergens'.

Allergy tests are most commonly recommended if your pet has recurrent skin problems but is increasingly being recommended for animals with chronic stomach or bowel problems as well (such as vomiting or diarrhoea).

Allergy testing at Natterjacks

There are many types of allergy blood tests available now but the one that we use is widely regarded as the most advanced and sensitive tests in the world. The tests are carried out by a Dutch laboratory known as Artuvet who pioneered allergy testing in animals and who produce the only licensed 'immunotherapy' treatment in Europe. Initially only a small number of environmental allergens were able to be tested for and the accuracy was low compared with 'intradermal' tests that involve injecting small amounts of allergens into the skin to provoke a reaction. However recent advancements now mean that now dozens and dozens of environmental items and foodstuffs can be tested for with a very high degree of accuracy.

How do I interpret the results of the allergy tests

The allergy test results come in the form of a 'score' of 1-300+ but this can cause confusion with interpretation as it is not considered to be a sliding scale in terms of how allergic they are to that particular item. Instead, it should be considered that any score over 175 is **very likely** to be contributing to the allergy, and any score over 200 is **almost certainly** contributing to the allergy. Any score under 175 is **much less likely** to be contributing to the allergy and anything under 150 is **almost certainly not** contributing. The score of 175 is considered to be cut-off point, above which steps should be taken to reduce the presence or impact of this allergen on your pet's skin.

It is worth pointing out that these results can change over time and an animal with a negative score for a certain substance may test positive a year later (and vice versa) as the



immune system is not constant and changes the way it behaves over time. Therefore it is always worth repeating the allergy tests from time to time (annually if costs permit) to ensure that the correct allergies are being addressed at that moment in time. This is particularly important if the allergies seem to be worsening again or are not well controlled with the existing regime.

How can I use these results to help my pet?

The first step in utilising these results is to either avoid or reduce the exposure to these allergens. This may involve avoiding certain foods, reducing exposure to indoor or food storage mites, avoiding certain wooded/grassy areas at certain times of year etc – ask us for more information on minimising exposure to the various allergens if you are unsure.

Note that an allergy to fish does not mean that you should avoid fish oil supplements as it is the protein content of these items that causes allergies – oil extracts (as contained in skin and joint supplements) should still be safe to administer.

Sometimes doing the above will be sufficient to reduce the severity of your pet's symptoms as nearly all allergies are a combination of factors and eliminating a few of these 'positives' may just be enough to get your pet below the threshold level at which they start itching or developing symptoms. See our 'Allergic Skin Disease' leaflet for a detailed explanation of the 'pruritic threshold', which shows how allergies have a cumulative effect leading to the development of symptoms once a certain level is reached.

What if I have taken the avoidance measures described above but my pet is still having problems?

If your pet still has severe symptoms in spite of taking avoidance measures, or if avoidance is not possible (e.g. lots of environmental allergens in house and garden), then they may be a candidate for immunotherapy. This is where tiny amounts of the items that they are allergic to are put into a specially prepared vial (again at the laboratory in Holland!) and then shipped back to the UK. This is then injected under the skin in increasing amounts over the course of several months to try to re-educate the immune system and persuade it to become more tolerant of that particular substance. One course of treatment may be enough for some animals though many animals will need a top-up booster every month long-term. There is also a version which can be administered orally under the tongue but the current data suggest that the injectable version carries a greater chance of success and this therefore remains the 'gold' standard.

Are the injections safe? Are they painful?



Yes the injections are very safe though many animals will be itchier when treatment is first started because we are effectively injecting the things they are allergic to! This may require an increase in medication or therapeutic K-laser treatment to reduce the symptoms for a few weeks whilst the immune system adapts and adjusts. The injections do not sting and are given via a fine insulin syringe so that most animals do not even feel them.

Can other meds be given alongside the immunotherapy?

Yes all existing skin supplements and medications can be used alongside the immunotherapy although the use of steroids within a week either side of the injections is discouraged as these can limit the ability of the immune system to respond to the injections. However they can be used if your pet is very itchy and other medications such as Ciclosporin, anti-histamines, Apoquel etc are not adequately controlling the symptoms. We are finding that K-laser treatment is very useful in alleviating any irritation or dermatitis and is particularly useful where it is desirable to avoid increasing the amount of medication being administered.

How effective are the injections? Will the injections 'cure' my pet of its allergies?

About 70-80% of animals will see a marked improvement in the severity of their allergies but a complete cure is unlikely and as mentioned above many will need monthly top-ups long-term to maintain the effectiveness of the injections. Generally the aim of the injections is to reduce the intensity of the allergy to a level where it is more easily managed and to reduce the number of 'flare ups' every year. A small proportion (<20%) may see little or no improvement and in these cases avoidance measures, careful management and the use of appropriate medications and supplements will have remain the mainstay of management. Many animals that are receiving the immunotherapy may also need to remain on some medication but hopefully at a much reduced level.