

## **SKIN AND ALLERGY PROBLEMS IN DOGS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The most common medical complaint we see in dogs is skin or ear related. Unlike humans who react to allergens with nasal symptoms, dogs react with skin problems. These problems may range from poor coat texture or length, to itching and chewing, to hot spots and self mutilation. Allergies may also play a part in chronic ear infections. To make matters more difficult to diagnose and treat, thyroid disease may add to the problem as well.

In order to overcome these frustrating symptoms your approach needs to be thorough and systematic. Shortcuts usually will not produce results and only add to owner frustration. This article will cover diagnosing and treating; inhalant, food, and flea allergies. There is no magic pill to deal with these problems. Unfortunately, there is also no "cure", only systematic treatment options.

### **INHALANT ALLERGIES**

Substances which can cause an allergic reaction in dogs are much the same as those which cause reactions in people including pollens, dust mites and molds. A clue to diagnosing these allergies is to look at the timing of the reaction. Does it happen year round? This may be mold or dust. If the reaction is seasonal, pollens may be the culprit. Symptoms of inhalant allergies include: scratching, biting, and chewing at feet constant.

**LICKING.** The itching may be most severe on feet, flanks, groin and armpits. Dogs may rub their face on the carpet. Ear flaps may become red and hot. Chronic ear infections may follow. Skin becomes thickened, greasy and has a strong odour. Hot spots may develop due to irritation from constant chewing or scratching, which is then followed by infection. Allergies have also been implicated as a possible cause of Acral Lick Granulomas, a frustrating, treatment resistant condition whereby the dog creates a sore on his skin from constant licking

### **DIAGNOSIS**

If a dog has the above symptoms and responds well to the treatment measures outlined below, no further diagnostic tests may be needed. If the problem is severe and does not respond to simple measures, allergy skin testing can be done. A portion of the skin is shaved and a variety of substances are injected into the skin to see if they provoke a reaction. If so, an

individual series of injections are formulated to give the dog over a period of time (there are blood tests designed to identify allergens without the skin testing, however their efficacy had not been proven. They should be reserved for cases where skin testing is not possible).

## **TREATMENT OPTIONS**

### **Symptomatic Therapy**

Treating the dogs' symptoms may include; cool baths with or without colloidal oatmeal, Epsom salts, or medicated shampoos. This can be done frequently but provides only temporary relief. Caution should be used with sprays and ointments because many contain potentially harmful substances. Dermacool is a safe spray containing witch hazel. Cortispray is a low dose, nonsystemic cortisone spray which can be safely used for short periods of time.

### **Immunotherapy**

Allergy shots are very safe and many people have great success with them, however, they are very slow to work. It may be six to twelve months before improvement is seen. Before testing, your pet must be free from all steroids, oral or injected (including those found in ear and eye medicines) for a specified period of time in order for the test to be valid. In all about 60 different substances are tested for.

### **Corticosteroids**

These compounds reduce itching by reducing inflammation. Unfortunately, they also affect every organ in the body. Steroids should be considered only when the allergy season is short; the amount of drug required is small or as a last resort to relieve a dog in extreme discomfort. Side effects can include increased thirst and appetite, increased need to urinate and behavioral changes. Long term use can result in diabetes, decreased resistance to infection and increased susceptibility to seizures. You can recognize steroids by the suffix "-one", such as cortisone, dexamethasone, prednisone...Etc... In short, alternatives to steroid therapy should always be considered.

## **Antihistamines**

Antihistamines can be used with relative safety in dogs. About one third of owners report success with them. The major drawback, as with people, is sedation. Check with your vet on correct dosing. Examples of antihistamines commonly used for dogs include: Tavist, Benadryl, Chlortrimeton, Atarax and Seldane. Personally, I have seen the best results with Atarax.

## **Omega-3 and Omega-6 Fatty Acids**

These fatty acids are natural anti-inflammatory agents. They reportedly are helpful in 20% of allergic dogs. They are certainly worth a try because they are not harmful and have virtually no side effects. Omega-3 fatty acids are found in fish oils (especially krill and cod) and omega-6 fatty acids are derived from plants containing gamma-linolenic acid (GLA), such as oil from the evening primrose. These supplements are different from those sold to produce a glossy coat. They tend to reduce inflammation that may lead to skin sores but are not as effective in reducing itching. Products that contain both omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids include: Omega Pet, Derm Caps, and EFA-Z Plus.

## **Environmental Control**

If you know which substances your dog is allergic to avoidance is the best method of control. Even if you are desensitizing the dog with allergy shots, it is best to avoid the allergen altogether. Molds can be reduced by using a dehumidifier or placing activated charcoal on top of the exposed dirt in your house plants. Dusts and pollens are best controlled by using an air cleaner with a HEPA filter. Air conditioning can also reduce circulating amounts of airborne allergens because windows are then kept closed.

## **Prevention**

While there is nothing you can do to prevent a rescue dog from developing allergies, breeders should be aware that allergic dogs **SHOULD NOT BE BRED!!!**