

Allergies

Darren Hawks, DVM

Summary

- * Allergies occur when an over-reactive immune system attacks substances that would normally be tolerated
- * Conventional therapy using steroids and antihistamines works quickly and provides relief but does not address the root cause of the over-reactive immune system
- * Alternative therapies for allergies address the balance of the immune system and overall health so that the allergy no longer exists. The patient is healthier after treatment
- * A species-appropriate diet free from chemicals, preservatives, and over-processing is the primary treatment for allergies and most other health problems
- * Probiotics, omega 3 fatty acids, digestive enzymes, herbs, homeopathy and many other therapies can be a part of the treatment plan for allergies

Many of our pets suffer from allergies- itchy skin, chewing paws, rubbing the face, recurrent ear infections, frequent skin infections, hot spots, vomiting, diarrhea, poor appetite, gas and bloating, among many other things. What goes wrong with the immune system, and what can we do about it?

There are a few types of common allergies: Atopy (inhaled allergies associated with pollen, mold, dust, and other air-borne particles), food allergies (can cause skin and/or gastrointestinal signs), contact allergies (grass, laundry detergent, cedar bedding; usually a smaller area of the pet), flea allergies, and asthma to name a few.

The immune system normally protects us from “foreign invaders” such as bacteria, viruses, fungi, etc. But sometimes a substance, or antigen, which would normally be tolerated (seen as normal by the immune system) is attacked. Pollen, mold and dust are “normal”, but an allergic patient’s immune system might now see them as an invader. Inflammation (of the skin, stomach, intestines, joints, etc.) is created to evict the “invader”.

What causes the immune system to start attacking things it really should tolerate as normal? Here are some potential causes:

1. Missing nutrients such as trace minerals and omega 3 fatty acids. The body simply does not have the basic equipment with which to quiet daily inflammation.

2. Having to deal with too many toxins, such as those created by the processing of food (AGEs, rancid fats-see discussion under alternative therapies), food additives, preservatives, chemicals in the water and air, etc. Even overfeeding, a VERY common practice for pet owners, can contribute to the overwhelm of a system. The liver is particularly sensitive to the end result of the body processing too much "bad" stuff.

3. Leaky gut syndrome. The cells of the intestines are normally knit closely together. Irritation of the intestines through poor diet, loss of good bacteria, drugs, etc., can result in increased space between the cells, allowing particles of things that would normally never see the interior of the body into the blood stream. This sets off inflammation in both the intestines and throughout the body. Leaky gut syndrome is likely associated with inflammatory diseases throughout the body. This is one major reason why probiotics (good bacteria), colostrum, and a good diet can help so much with allergies and inflammation.

4. Stress - can come in many forms. You might not think much about stress in your pet, but there are many potential sources of stress in your pet's life. Not having basic, instinctual needs met can cause all sorts of problems. Lack of exercise, not enough play or positive interaction with owners, lack of mental stimulation, and no outlet for normal behaviors such as scratching (cats), chewing, or digging can definitely have negative effects. Other possible sources of stress might include previous emotional trauma, loss of a close human or pet, anxiety, and difficult interactions with other pets.

Even the energy in a home, or that of the people in the home, can cause stress for a pet. Anger, arguing, fear, anxiety, problems with finances or relationships, or just the scattered, frenetic or chaotic energies of a family can be the root of problems at times. Even too much neurotic focus on the perceived health problems of a pet can result in unintentional consequences. Sometimes the energy of the entire household must be managed in order to improve a pet's health.

5. For those of you with a more esoteric leaning, allergies can also be caused by trauma or emotions experienced at the time of exposure to an "allergen". It is the holding of these negative energies that got "stuck" to an "allergen" that is being attacked by the immune system. Also, "holes" in your energetic field can make you more vulnerable to outside influences. This is where some of the energetic modalities such as flower essences and NAET can be beneficial.

Conventional Treatment

The goal of most conventional treatments is to get rid of the symptoms - itchy skin, infections, vomiting, etc. With this approach, the root cause (what made

the immune system over reactive?) is not addressed, although the patient will likely experience great relief. Common treatments include:

- 1) Antihistamines- keep mast cells from releasing histamine, which reduces redness, itching, and swelling
- 2) Immunosuppression- steroids (prednisone, dexamethasone, cortisone) and cyclosporine (Atopica) SUPPRESS the immune system so that it cannot react
- 3) Allergy shots- the patient is given very small doses of whatever they are allergic to. The doses are very gradually increased over time, and the patient develops tolerance to the allergens

There are some consequences to a conventional approach:

1. Side effects of drugs themselves. Prednisone especially can cause increased thirst, urination, and hunger as well as pot belly (weak abdominal muscles and liver enlargement), ligaments prone to tear (anterior cruciate ligament tears), lethargy, anxiety, panting, weight gain, and with long-term use, liver problems
2. Suppressed immune system (which is how prednisone and cyclosporin work) can result in skin, bladder and upper respiratory infections
3. Suppression of disease. This is probably a new concept for many of you. If instead of treating the root cause of any particular symptom (by healing the body so that the symptom resolves by itself), you "suppress" the symptom by just removing the outside manifestation (for example, itching), that disease process is driven deeper into the body. So instead of having external skin problems, you might treat with prednisone and then have the underlying "illness" show up in a more critical, deeper body system such as the lungs (asthma) or nervous system (seizures). A conventional doctor might think the diseases unrelated, but the suppression of one problem might have led to the expression of a more serious one over time.

Other things that might be helpful in controlling allergies might include:

Preventing exposure to a known allergen. This requires allergy testing or detective work

Wiping paws after walking outdoors or on grass (use something without chemicals or fragrance!)

Using an air purifier to remove molds, pollens, smoke, etc

Feeding a hypoallergenic/ limited antigen diet for food allergy - this is a different concept than that of using a good diet for overall allergies. A hypoallergenic

diet simply avoids the problem rather than corrects the immune system's reaction. Hypoallergenic diets are also specifically for food allergies, not other forms of allergies. But hypoallergenic diets are a critical part of the overall therapy of food allergies. Just be sure to check the ingredient list for undesirable ingredients. Toxins associated with processed foods can still be an issue with many processed hypoallergenic diets, in which case a fresher form of hypoallergenic diet might be a better option.

Avoid smoking

Check kitty litter for dust or possible allergens

Frequent bathing with a soap-free, fragrance-free, hypoallergenic soap. This can remove allergens from the skin and minimize exposure

Hypoallergenic laundry detergent - some people and dogs are allergic to fragrance

Minimize house dust - vacuum with a HEPA filter, use a HEPA filter for heating/AC
Wool, feathers, mold, cedar beds- remove if suspected as cause of allergy.

Alternative Therapies for allergies:

1. Nutrition, nutrition, nutrition - the first and foremost foundational element in the treatment of most body imbalances! The goal is to supply all needed nutrients in OPTIMAL levels, not just enough to prevent deficiency diseases. You will want to avoid processed foods and treats (watch those treats and read your labels!). The high temperature and pressure used for kibbles and canned foods convert healthy fatty acids into inflammatory trans fatty acids, as well as create free radicals and Advanced Glycation End-products (AGE's), all of which contribute to degenerative diseases throughout the body. Ideally, one would try to mimic what your pet evolved to eat- dogs mostly meat, with very little grain/vegetable; cats with extremely limited vegetable (grass) and grain (only what would be in prey stomach); organs, tripe (intestines), and bone. Today's convenient but processed foods have way too much grain/carbohydrate, which is used primarily to keep costs down and to be able to create a kibble (for your convenience, not your pet's health!).

The optimum diet for not only most health problems, but also for just basic health, is a balanced, unprocessed raw food. Enzymes, antioxidants, proteins and fat are not denatured by the high heat and pressure of processing. This allows the body to spend only the energy needed for digestion, allows easy extraction of nutrients, and avoids over-taxation of the liver and other organs to excrete all the inflammatory/toxic products either purposely added

(preservatives, flavors, GMOs) or unintentionally created by processing. Some conditions in Traditional Chinese Medicine might benefit from light cooking of the diet, but the temperatures used for home cooking are much lower, and much less damaging, than typical commercial processing.

The next best food is an air-dried raw diet such as ZiwiPeak (currently the only such diet available!). The lower temperatures and absence of pressure during the preparation creates less damage to the ingredients. One major advantage is that it is very convenient, especially for those with hectic schedules or an aversion to raw meats. Ziwi Peak also has the advantage of using free-range, antibiotic- & hormone-free meats of a consistent and known source, along with organ meat, tripe and bone in the proportions found in a whole prey body - just what they would eat in the wild. Results with ZiwiPeak for allergies are still phenomenal!

The dehydrated meat diets are the next category. The high meat content, absence of grains, and probable lack of chemicals (always check the ingredient list) make them a good choice.

Grain free kibbles with high percentage of meat are definitely lower on the list, but much better than the average kibble. Still, any kibble has more carbohydrate (even if it is potato or pea) than a cat or dog would eat in the wild. Again, this is done for your convenience, not your animal's health! Avoid any kibble with grain as the first ingredient at all costs, even if your pet has not health problems (unless your veterinarian specifically prescribes such a diet for a severe health problem; even then I would check for options)!

2. Avoid garbage in - don't tax the already stressed system. The body needs to heal the damage, not spend energy getting rid of new stuff every day. Avoid foods with preservatives, artificial ingredients, grains, propylene glycol, BHA, BHT (please note that any fat source on the ingredient list that does not specifically say "naturally preserved" can still contain BHA/BHT if the preservatives were added prior to coming to the pet food manufacturer!) or other chemicals. Use purified water. Avoid plastic food and water bowls, and minimize exposure to EMF. Avoid stress- use exercise, pheromones (DAP, Feliway), and environmental enrichment to address the individual emotional and social needs of a cat or dog.

3. Probiotics, digestive enzymes, and colostrum- Probiotics are becoming the new big thing for health. They actually help modulate the immune system and have shown benefits for asthma, gastrointestinal disease, and more. Most of the cells of the immune system are in the gastrointestinal tract. Keeping them happy helps reduce inflammation throughout the body and helps regulate the immune system. Digestive enzymes can keep partially undigested food from reaching

the lower intestinal tract and causing a reaction. Colostrum can help with leaky gut syndrome. All of this can help with allergies.

4. Detoxification - sometimes feeding a raw diet allows the body to gently detoxify on its own. Sometimes skin problems can actually worsen for a time in the beginning as the body rids itself of toxins it was incapable of processing when on overload from a toxin-filled processed diet. Sometimes additional detoxification is warranted. Fasting can be an excellent jump start for an allergy program, for both pets and humans. Talk with a health care provider familiar with fasting first. Herbs and nutrients can be used for a colon and/or liver detoxification; again talk with your doctor first for guidance.

5. Omega 3 fatty acids are an important supplement for allergies. These fatty acids actually decrease inflammation in the body. Fish oils are the most common source, but one does have to be aware of quality issues with oxidation (both during manufacturing and storage), mercury, and arsenic. Krill oil can avoid some of these problems. Cats supposedly require an animal source, but I have seen improvements in both cats and dogs with Missing Link, a flax-based supplement.

6. Other treatments:

Antioxidant supplements can be helpful to address the free radical damage occurring during inflammation. Spirulina can be beneficial for allergies, providing trace minerals and fatty acids. Chlorella can help pull heavy metals out of the gastrointestinal tract during detoxification. Herbs, both Chinese and western, can be helpful. Flower essences (for emotions and frazzled energy), homeopathy, and NAET can also be used.

7. Temporary relief - sometimes you need something to help while waiting for deeper treatments to work. Cool water bathing (with just water) can take down the itch and make a pet less miserable. Some herbs, such as nettles, can be used in a conventional, suppressive way to minimize itching and histamine release. Topical application of diluted essential oils (please check with a veterinarian first, as some oils are toxic, especially for cats), herbal teas, Noni/lavender gel, or calendula gel can be helpful. Exercise can also help decrease itching, theoretically by helping move stagnation in the liver. If absolutely needed, use conventional medications such as antihistamines or prednisone in low doses; just be sure to let your holistic veterinarian know.

Allergies can be a frustrating problem, and alternative therapy might take several months rather than just the few days required for conventional treatments. Conventional therapy works quickly because it simply removes the symptoms. But remember, the goal of alternative therapy is to re-establish health

and remove the root cause of the unbalanced immune system. That way, you have a healthier pet!