



Canine Allergies:

Understanding and Management

Canine allergies are a common condition where your dog's immune system overreacts to harmless substances (allergens), typically manifesting as skin issues. Managing allergies is often a lifelong journey, but understanding the triggers can significantly improve your dog's quality of life.



What are the Main Types of Allergies?

There are three primary categories of allergies in dogs:

1. **Flea Allergy Dermatitis (FAD):** The most common allergy. Caused by an allergic reaction to proteins in flea saliva. **It only takes one bite** to trigger a severe reaction and intense itching.
2. **Environmental Allergies (Atopy/Atopic Dermatitis):** An overreaction to airborne or contact allergens, similar to hay fever in humans.
 - **Common Allergens:** Pollens (grass, trees, weeds), mold spores, dust mites, and dander.
 - **Seasonal vs. Non-Seasonal:** Symptoms may be seasonal (e.g., spring/fall) or year-round (e.g., dust mites).
3. **Food Allergies:** Less common than FAD or Atopy. This is an immune reaction to a protein (like beef, chicken, or dairy) or, less often, a carbohydrate source (like wheat or soy) in their diet. It is **not** the same as food intolerance.



Diagnosis: The Allergy Work-Up

Diagnosing the specific cause of a dog's allergy is a process of elimination:

1. **Rule Out Parasites:** The first step is to ensure aggressive, effective flea and mite control.
2. **Food Elimination Trial:** This is the **only reliable way** to diagnose a food allergy.
 - Your vet will prescribe a specialized diet (either **novel protein** or **hydrolyzed protein**).
 - Your dog must eat **only** the prescribed food and water for 8-12 weeks—**no treats, table scraps, flavored medications, or chew toys** are allowed.
3. **Environmental Allergy Testing:**
 - **Intradermal Skin Testing (IDST):** Considered the gold standard. A small amount of various allergens are injected under the skin to observe for a reaction (hive formation).
 - **Blood (Serum) Testing:** A blood sample is analyzed for antibodies to various environmental allergens. Blood testing is less reliable overall compared to IDST testing.



Common Symptoms of Canine Allergies

Unlike people, who often sneeze, dogs typically show allergic reactions through their **skin and ears**.

Area	Symptom
Skin/Body	Intense Itching (Pruritus)
Feet/Paws	Red, irritated paws; frequent licking/chewing of the feet.
Ears	Recurrent ear infections (redness, odor, discharge).
Coat	Hair loss (due to scratching), greasy or smelly coat.
Skin Lesions	Redness, bumps, pustules, scabs, and thickened/darkened skin (hyperpigmentation) from chronic inflammation.
Gastrointestinal (Food Allergy)	Vomiting, diarrhea, or frequent bowel movements (less common than skin symptoms).

IMPORTANT NOTE: Allergies cause inflammation and itching, which leads to scratching. This often results in **secondary bacterial or yeast infections** that make the itching much worse. Treating the infection is crucial for long-term relief.

Management and Treatment Options

Treatment is often multimodal, combining various strategies to reach the dog's "itch threshold."

Primary Strategies:

- **Year-Round Flea Control:** Essential for all allergic dogs, even if FAD is not the main problem.
- **Immunotherapy (Allergy Shots/Drops):** This involves customized injections or oral drops containing small amounts of the specific allergens identified during testing. It's the only treatment that can potentially **cure** the allergy by desensitizing the immune system. Takes 6-12 months to see full effect.
- **Apoquel, Cytopoint, or Corticosteroids:** Medications that target the itch-inflammation cycle for quick and effective relief.

Supportive Care:

- **Medicated Shampoos/Wipes:** Frequent bathing (as directed by your vet) can remove allergens, soothe the skin, and treat secondary infections.
- **Essential Fatty Acids (EFA):** Omega-3 supplements can help strengthen the skin barrier and reduce overall inflammation.
- **Addressing Secondary Infections:** Antibiotics or antifungals (oral or topical) will be prescribed to clear up bacterial or yeast infections.
- **Dietary Management:** Sticking to the hydrolyzed or novel protein diet if a food allergy is diagnosed.



Tips for Owners

- **Keep an Allergy Diary:** Note flare-ups, new foods/treats, time of year, and any new symptoms to help your vet identify patterns.
- **Minimize Environmental Exposure (if known):**
 - Wipe down paws/coat after outdoor activity.
 - Wash pet bedding frequently in hot water.
 - Use a HEPA air filter in rooms where your dog spends the most time.
- **Consistent Communication:** Allergies change over time. Work closely with your veterinarian to adjust your dog's long-term management plan.



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