

Mountain View Animal Hospital

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Food Allergies

It is estimated that food allergies account for greater than 20% of all allergic skin conditions in dogs. Basically, a food allergy is an adverse reaction by the immune system to ingredients in the diet. Allergens, those components of food that stimulate an allergy, are almost exclusively the protein or carbohydrate source (such as beef, wheat, chicken, and dairy). A food allergy typically results in itching, skin problems, or intestinal upset. Food allergies can occur at any age and can develop over time – even if your dog has been on the same diet for years! Some dogs become allergic to a diet within a few days, while others may eat a particular food for many years before becoming allergic. Some breeds may be genetically predisposed to food allergies, such as: Retrievers, Cocker spaniels, Shar-peis, Dalmations, Poodles, Shepherds, Boxers, and Bulldogs.

How to Recognize the Symptoms

Unlike flea or environmental (“hay-fever”) allergies, which are usually seasonal, food allergies tend to occur all year long. One thing to keep in mind, though, is that dogs with one allergy will generally have multiple allergies. So your dog may only show symptoms of allergies during certain times of the year, when his allergy “threshold” has been reached by the addition of environmental allergens or fleas. Generally, the symptoms involve either the skin or the GI system, or both.

The most common sign associated with the skin is itchiness. The itchiness may be limited to the ears, or may extend to the face, feet, tail and abdomen. Constant licking is a sign of itchiness. Itching can also lead to generalized redness of the skin and secondary skin infections. Gastrointestinal symptoms may include everything from excess gas, to chronic intermittent vomiting, diarrhea, and weight loss. These signs can also accompany skin conditions.

Diagnosing Food Allergies

Unfortunately, there is no simple and fool-proof way to diagnose a food allergy. There is an allergy test (a blood test) which can help to steer you in the right direction as far as which diet to feed, but the gold standard of treatment and diagnosis is an elimination diet trial. This involves feeding a special diet that contains a single protein source and a single carbohydrate source that your dog has never been exposed to before. It must be fed exclusively for 8-12 weeks. This means NO BONES, NO TREATS, NO DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS, AND NO HUMAN FOOD of any kind! The purpose of the elimination diet trial is to see if your dog improves when protected from exposure to suspected food allergens. If the symptoms resolve during the elimination diet trial, a diagnosis of food allergy is likely. The diagnosis is confirmed by feeding your dog their original diet and seeing the signs reappear. Elimination diet trials are an effective way to diagnose food allergies, but they do require a commitment from the entire family to get accurate results.

Two Different Strategies

There are two main ways to go about doing an elimination diet trial – using a novel protein diet, or using a modified protein diet.

- **Novel Protein Diet** – You may decide to initially try what is called a “novel protein” diet. These diets consist of novel protein/carbohydrate sources, or ingredients not commonly found in pet foods. The disadvantage to trying this type of diet is that (particularly without an allergy test to help guide your choices) you may choose a diet to which your dog is STILL allergic. (It’s a guessing game)
- **Modified Protein Diet** – Another approach to diagnosing food allergies is to use a diet that has been molecularly modified to alter the physical characteristics of the protein molecules. Essentially, the protein molecules are broken down to smaller particles that are virtually unrecognizable to the immune system as a foreign protein in the body. Since these smaller particles are less likely to elicit an immune response, the resulting protein is considered hypoallergenic. The disadvantage to using this type of diet is that they are more expensive than the novel protein diets (but you may still save money in the end by getting to a diagnosis faster).