

ATOPIC DERMATITIS : INFORMATION FOR OWNERS

ATOPIC DERMATITIS IS THE TERM USED IN VETERINARY MEDICINE for a disease condition that is thought to be related to allergies to environmental substances. These substances, called “allergens”, may be pollens, plant or animal fibers, house dust, or molds. Animals with atopic dermatitis (called “atopics”) often show symptoms such as scratching, especially at their ears and axillae, licking their paws, and rubbing their face. This is a clinical diagnosis, made by excluding all other causes of itching.

There are two common ways of determining to what your pet may be allergic. The first is the intradermal test. After clipping the hair on one side of the chest of your dog or cat, very small amounts of the suspected allergens are injected into the skin. This is slightly uncomfortable but most pets tolerate the procedure quite well. Occasionally a tranquilizer is needed to ensure the animal’s cooperation. The veterinarian evaluates the reactivity of the various allergens within a half-hour following the injections.

The second method of determining what the pet may be allergic to involves evaluation of a blood test that measures the amount of specific antibodies directed against each allergen. Results are available about 10 days after being submitted.

If a pet is diagnosed as being atopic, several different types of therapy can be tried. The first is to remove the offending allergen from the animal’s environment. This is not possible in many cases, but should be considered when wool, kapok (a furniture stuffing), tobacco, or similar allergens are implicated. The second means of therapy is hyposensitization (allergen-specific immunotherapy), or “allergy shots.” These are a series of injections of diluted allergens that are given to render the pet less sensitive to its allergies. The mechanism by which the injections work is not well understood. Owners are trained to give the injections at home. Approximately 60% of owners report that the injections will benefit their pet after 10 months. A newer form of hyposensitization involves “squirting” a solution containing the allergens directly into the pet’s mouth twice a day. Preliminary results of sublingual immunotherapy are show approximately 60-70% of pets showing improvement after one year.

The third type of therapy involves the use of drugs. Antihistamines are of limited use in small animals but a short trial of at least 3 different drugs may be recommended to determine if one will be helpful for your pet. Supplementation with some fatty acid preparations has also been shown to provide some allergic animals with relief. The most frequently used anti-itch drug in veterinary medicine is cortisone, or its related analogs such as prednisone. In order to minimize potential side effects, animals are usually treated with the lowest every-other-day dose that is effective. Oral cyclosporine has been demonstrated to be effective and may be appropriate to use for treatment of your pet. Your veterinarian will discuss which options are most appropriate for your pet. Keeping a diary to document your pet’s level of itching will be helpful.

Lastly, topical therapy and control of secondary infections is important in controlling itching and flare-ups of the disease. Your dog will be reexamined periodically and appropriate medications will be prescribed.