Dog Allergy FAQs

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FAQs
Dog Allergies

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What is an allergy?

An allergy is a reaction to an allergen, a substance capable of inducing a hypersensitive reaction in humans and animals. An allergen can be almost any natural or man-made substance in the environment such as grass, pollen, flea saliva, dust, or even fabric. Allergens enter your pet's body via inhalation, ingestion, injection, parasites, or touch. When humans have allergies, they tend to sneeze, have watery eyes, and a runny nose. Dogs and cats are more likely to excessively scratch or lick themselves instead.

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How does an allergen create allergies?

When your pet is first exposed to the potential allergen, such as grass pollen, his immune system develops antibodies to the pollen, though there will be no noticeable outward symptoms during this initial exposure.

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The next time your pet comes in contact with this allergen, the antibodies go into hyper action. They send out signals to the immune system to produce a protein called Immunoglobulin E (IgE) that binds to cells called mast cells in the skin and causes a chemical called histamine to be released. Histamines have many functions in the body, among them the dilation (or opening up) of capillaries and contraction (or tightening up) of muscles, both of which contribute to intense itching.

Each exposure to the allergen causes a new reaction, and if not treated, the pet has no choice but to scratch or chew at the inflamed area, causing further inflammation, welts, and sores - even ear infections.
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What are the most common signs (symptoms) that my dog has allergies?

You will usually see scratching, licking the paws, rubbing the face, or watery eyes. The most destructive of these is scratching, since an animal can scratch himself raw, which can eventually lead to secondary infections, excessive shedding, and alopecia (hair loss). It is important to remember that even though your pet may show some or all of these signs, he may not have allergies. He may be suffering from any number of other medical conditions, such as fleas or hormonal disorders. See your veterinarian for an accurate diagnosis.
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What are some common types of allergies?

Atopy or allergic inhalant dermatitis (when your pet is sensitive to airborne particles) by far accounts for most skin problems in dogs. Unlike humans, your pet's reaction is not to sneeze out whatever is causing the allergy. Although pets do exhibit watery eyes and some sneezing, animals mostly show reactions in their skin. They typically chew at their paws, scratch at their skin, and in some cases, develop secondary skin and ear infections. Common allergens include trees, grass, and weed pollens, house dust, molds, and dander.

Flea Allergy Dermatitis (FAD) is another common allergy in pets. Pets with FAD are not only irritated by flea bites, but are allergic to the parasite's saliva. When the pet receives his first flea bite, his immune system responds and is hyperactivated. Then, when the pet is bitten again, a more severe itching occurs, causing intense scratching. This not only starts a seemingly never-ending itch cycle, it also causes hive-like lesions from all of the bites, making the pet very uncomfortable.

Contact Dermatitis is an allergic reaction to a substance that touches the skin. Common products that can cause contact allergies are plastics, fabrics, and topical antibiotics. Typically, animals that suffer from these have reddened itchy skin covered in small, pus-filled welts. Caustic substances such as certain chemicals and poison ivy may cause a condition called irritant contact dermatitis, which

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should not be confused with an allergy.

Food sensitivities is a general and more fitting term for what pet owners think of as 'food allergies.' The umbrella group of 'food sensitivities' actually includes food intolerance (which shows up as flatulence, vomiting, and diarrhea) and food allergies, a reaction of your pet's immune system that manifests in the skin. Most often, proteins are the culprits. Milk, soy, beef, and pork are some examples.
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At what age could my dog begin to develop allergies?
Most dogs develop allergies between one and four years of age.
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Are certain dog breeds more allergy-prone?
No. Allergies are quite common in many breeds and mixed breeds. Some allergies are passed down genetically from parents to offspring.
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Is there anything I can apply topically or give orally to my dog to temporarily reduce his skin irritations?
Shampooing can help relieve the itch temporarily as well as helping to remove scales, scabs, some parasites, bacteria, and other potential causes of itching. Consider giving frequent cool baths. Washing or rinsing the legs and paws each time the dog comes inside during the allergy season may help keep the pet more comfortable.

Relieving the itching with topical products containing hydrocotisone can also be effective.

Often, simply feeding a premium diet combined with a fatty acid supplement can help. Work with your veterinarian to develop an allergy management plan that works best for your dog.
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