

It Itches! Atopic Dermatitis

By: Caitlyn Contreary, DVM, DACVD | www.gcvcs.com

Is your pet itchy? Does your pet scratch, lick, bite or chew his/her skin? If so, he or she may have allergies. Environmental allergies (also called atopic dermatitis) affect dogs, cats, horses and many other species. These animals can be allergic to dust, pollens and molds found

upon the time of year (and what's blooming). Many dogs with atopic dermatitis will lick their paws, scratch their ears, rub their

face and scratch at other parts of their body. Cats with atopic dermatitis can be itchy

both inside and outside. Unlike people, who wheeze and sneeze from environmental allergies, pets with atopic dermatitis most often have itchy skin and itchy ears. It's quite common for these episodes of itchiness to lead to hair loss and even skin or ear infections. Some pets with atopic dermatitis are itchy year round, but others' itchiness will vary depending

anywhere they want; from their face all the way to their tail.

The only true way to diagnose atopic dermatitis is to rule out all other causes of hair loss or itchiness first: flea allergies, food allergies, ringworm, mange, etc. This is very important because there is no test that tells us with certainty that a pet has environmental allergies. Once

your veterinarian has ruled out all other reasonable causes of itchiness have been ruled out, it is time to consider allergy testing. Allergy testing can be performed in two ways: a blood test and a skin test. A blood test involves sending a blood sample to a laboratory where it is mixed with allergens such as pollens and molds and the laboratory measures any reactions that take place. A skin test involves shaving an area of hair and injecting allergens under the skin to see if the skin reacts.

These tests are used to determine what to put into the pet's allergy serum. The serum is a combination of allergens that is either injected under the skin or given by mouth on a regular basis. The idea behind this therapy is that by frequently exposing the immune system to small amounts of allergens, the pet won't react as strongly

when he or she comes in contact with that allergen in the environment. In essence, we are trying to "retrain" the immune system to ignore those allergens. This therapy benefits about 70% of pets and is usually quite safe as a long term treatment. Other treatment options include antihistamines, medications designed to dampen the immune system, and medicated baths.

If your pet is itchy or keeps getting skin or ear infections, ask your veterinarian about allergies. It may take some time to determine if your pet has atopic dermatitis, but once that diagnosis is made you can work together to improve your pet's quality of life.

