



FOOD ALLERGIES IN PETS

We all know someone who has an allergy to some type of food, whether it's peanuts, shellfish, yeast (in bread), dairy products, etc. But you may be surprised to learn that food allergies account for approximately 5 to 10% of allergy cases that we see in dogs and cats.

By far, the majority of allergies we see in pets are related to pollens (from grass, trees and weeds), dusts and dust mites, molds and mildew, and fleas. Typically, these allergies are seasonal in nature, just like in people. Allergies from these sources usually cause hair loss, irritated skin, skin infections as well as frequent biting, scratching, chewing, licking and rubbing. Yet pets with food allergies will often exhibit the same symptoms and the same skin condition. To complicate matters, as many as 75% of pets with food allergies also have an allergy to either pollens, dust, molds, mildew or fleas.

So, how do we know if a pet has a food allergy? I'll address that later, but there's one more 'wrinkle' that confuses the situation even further. In addition to food allergies, we also see "food intolerances". So, what's the difference? Food intolerances do not involve the body's immune (natural defense) system and they usually result from food additives, such as sulfites, MSG and food dyes. Food allergies, on the other hand, do affect the body's immune system and result from a reaction to a protein in the food.

WHAT ARE PETS USUALLY ALLERGIC TO ?

DOGS: * **Beef, dairy products and wheat** account for nearly 70% of food allergies

* Chicken, chicken eggs, lamb or soy account for about 25% of food allergies

* Corn, oatmeal, pasta, pork, fish, turkey, rabbit, rice flour, artificial food additives and food preservatives may also cause food allergies

*** 80% of dogs are allergic to only 1 or 2 food sources

Dog Breeds most likely to be affected: Cocker Spaniels, Springer Spaniels, Labrador Retrievers, Collies, Schnauzers, Shar-Peis, Poodles, Westies, Boxers, Dachshunds, Lhasa Apsos, German Shepherds, Dalmatians and Golden Retrievers

Food allergies are always suspected when we see a very itchy dog that's free of fleas and mange. The typical itchy areas include the **ears**, the feet, the armpits, the nose, and the groin area. Many dogs also have gastrointestinal problems such as occasional vomiting, diarrhea or an increase in the frequency of bowel movements. When pets have year-round skin and/or ear problems, we always have a stronger suspicion of a food allergy.

CATS: * **Beef, dairy products, and fish** account for 90% of food allergies

* Pork, chicken, rabbit, lamb, eggs, clam juice and cod liver oil are other sources of food allergies

Cat breeds more likely to be affected: Siamese and mixed-Siamese

A VERY COMMON MISTAKE THAT MOST PET OWNERS MAKE

By far the most common mistake pet owners make when they suspect their pet may have a food allergy is to simply purchase a new dog or cat food without considering what may actually be causing a food allergy ... or they assume that their pet must be allergic to corn or some grain. So they go to their local pet store and switch to a lamb diet, or an "all-natural" diet (I'm not even sure what an "all-natural" diet even is ... but it sure sounds *great*, doesn't it !?), or any diet that sounds like it's better than what they're currently feeding their pet.

But all too often, the majority of pet owners are doing nothing more than just trading one brand of pet food for another brand of food. They are simply switching "labels", but not changing the cause / source of the food allergy. Now that you understand what pets are most likely allergic to, you can understand why this seldom works. Avoid the trap of simply changing the diet just because we feel compelled to "do something" ! The purpose of this handout is to educate you to make a better decision if you are going to switch diets.

DIAGNOSING FOOD ALLERGIES

With allergies to pollens, fleas, house dust, etc, we can perform skin tests (like a "patch test" in a person) or blood tests to find out specifically what pets (or people) are allergic to. Unfortunately, there's no fully reliable skin test or blood test that can help us identify what food a pet may be allergic to. So, when we suspect a food allergy, it is best to place that pet on a "food allergy trial", which means that we need to feed a special diet in which we avoid any protein / food source that the pet has eaten before.

We now have a variety of commercial diets designed to "test" for a food allergy, but there is no single diet that works for all allergic pets. Even under the best of circumstances, **only 80-85% of pets will respond favorably to a food allergy trial.**

Commercial diets for food allergies are divided into 2 categories:

- 1) Novel ("new") protein diets - the idea is to offer a unique food source that the pet has never been exposed to before, such as duck, venison, ostrich or kangaroo.
- 2) Protein Hydrolysate diet - these are the most recent additions to managing food allergies as these diets are made by chopping up the proteins in the diet to tiny "peptides" which the body presumably cannot detect, and therefore should not have an allergic reaction to. The Hills Prescription Diet z/d Ultra Allergen Free and the z/d Low Allergen diets have proven to be successful in managing many pets with food allergies.

HOME-MADE DIETS FOR DOGS:

Home-made diets have proven to be quite successful in many cases, too. But it takes a **very** dedicated pet owner, since it is imperative to prepare the same home-cooked diet for a minimum of 8 weeks. Read that again: A minimum of 8 weeks ! The best choice is a combination of a carbohydrate such as potatoes, peas or pinto beans (and DO NOT add butter, milk, bread, etc) with a novel protein such as venison, duck, ostrich, elk or rabbit (these can often be ordered through the internet).

If you don't have access to one of the novel proteins, then a diet consisting exclusively of potatoes, peas or pinto beans is satisfactory. While this diet doesn't seem very appealing or nourishing, remember that the whole purpose of the diet is to try to identify if the pet has a food allergy over a mere 2 to 3 months.

HOME-MADE DIETS FOR CATS:

Since cats can be fussy about what they eat, cooking up a home-made diet for a kitty can be a huge challenge, but there are several choices of proteins. Lamb, ostrich, rabbit, venison or duck have all been used with good success. They can be fed alone, or they can be blended with potato or rice. In general, we recommend a commercial food allergy diet for cats since they can be so finicky.

ARE YOU A DEDICATED PET OWNER ? : The Biggest Challenge to a Food Allergy Trial !

Once we begin a food allergy trial, **these pets can eat absolutely NOTHING ELSE FOR 8 to 12 WEEKS except for the special diet !** This means that no other foods, treats, flavored chew toys, or flavored heartworm preventives (which generally means all popular heartworm preventions) should be given to your pet during the trial.

Please understand: If a pet owner should decide to cheat / stray at all from the recommended diet, it will defeat the whole purpose of the food trial !

Other important features for you to follow ...

For DOGS on a Food Allergy trial:

- 1) **NO !!! Cheese – Bread – Peanut butter – Rawhide bones – Milk bone type treats – Greenies - Poultry or beef favored toothpaste – Flavored heartworm tablets (!!!)**
- 2) **Confine your dog to leash walks to prevent them from wandering on their own and finding other food sources.**
- 3) **If you're giving medication to your dog, you can use marshmallows to hide the pills.**
- 4) **If you brush your pet's teeth, use a "vanilla mint" flavored pet toothpaste.**
- 5) **Keep your dog out of the kitty litter !**
- 6) **Prevent your dog from licking the food dish of another dog or cat.**
- 7) **Re-read #1 through #6 ... then read it again :-D**

For CATS on a Food Allergy trial:

- 1) **Do not let your cats go outdoors since they can often find other food sources.**
- 2) **Prevent your cat from licking the food dish of another cat or dog.**

Skin infections caused by bacteria and/or yeast can cause considerable itching, so it's important to watch for red or irritated areas of skin. We need to treat these skin infections to help accurately gauge the success of a food allergy trial.

We typically know in 8 to 12 weeks if your pet has a food allergy, but **remember that 10-15% of pets that have a food allergy may not respond to a dietary trial**. If we get a noticeable improvement, we can then try to find the cause of the allergy by introducing individual proteins or sources of meat every 2 weeks to try to identify what triggered the allergic reaction. We'll start by introducing beef or dairy products, then (if necessary) other possible ingredients to find what actually caused the problem. If we can identify the food that's causing the problem, then you'll know what to avoid feeding your pet. Of course, many clients are happy to keep their pet on the new diet, and may decide that it's not worth it to find out what their pet is allergic to.

Food allergies can be a challenge to diagnose, but a **committed, disciplined and dedicated pet owner** will certainly find a way to stick with the diet plan. The reward for your pet's comfort can be well worth the effort.



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