

# Veterinary Specialists Inc.

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## FOOD ALLERGY

### *Overview of food allergy*

Food allergy is an uncommon disease of dogs and cats than can start at any age. A change in diet is not required to develop a food allergy. Most animals (70%) develop allergies to foods that they have been fed for a long time (over 2 years). Foods that are most commonly responsible for allergies include beef, chicken, fish, eggs, and milk. Allergies are genetically determined. Dogs with other allergies may be at increased risk for developing a food allergy.

Food allergy manifests with itchy skin (especially face, feet and ears) and with chronic skin (e.g. skin odor, scaling, and red bumps) and ear infections. Itching may be very intense in some animals leading to self-mutilation. In rare cases animals may also have diarrhea and vomiting, however, the majority of dogs and cats with food allergy develop only skin problems.

Other allergies (e.g. inhalant allergies or pollen allergies) may look very similar to food allergy (same clinical signs and same distribution of itching). In some cases it is impossible to differentiate between inhalant and food allergies by clinical appearance only. As, food allergy is the easiest disease to control (e.g. avoid the offending food), it is important to rule out food allergy before considering expensive tests for other allergies.

### *Vet Care—What to Expect*

To diagnose food allergy it is important to do a food trial. A food blood allergy testing is of no value in determining which foods to avoid and studies have suggested that it is not helpful in diagnosing food allergy.

A food trial consists in the identification of a diet that contains **ingredients** to which your pet has **NEVER BEEN EXPOSED** (novel source of protein and a novel source of carbohydrate) and in the strict use of this diet for **8-12 weeks**.

Skin and ear infections should be cleared with appropriate therapy before the beginning of the food trial. The reason for this is that an important part of the food trial consists in the monitoring of the itching and relapses of skin infections. Skin infections make your pet itchy thus they would interfere with the evaluation of the food trial.

If your pet stops itching or it does not relapse with infections during the food trial, food allergy is a possibility. To confirm that, challenge with the “old” diet and monitoring of itching and infections should be done. Some pets may worsen within a few hours after the challenge, while others may take several days. It is important that you challenge your pet with one thing at a time (e.g. one type of treats at a time or one ingredient at a time) so that if worsening occurs, it will be easier for you to figure out the offending food. We will guide you through this process.

Home-cooked diets are preferable than special commercial diets for a food trial. Home cooked diets eliminate the possibility of preservatives being a cause of the allergy to your pet. Home-cooked diets are the ideal way to assess a food allergy. We have recipes for home-cooked diets that are well-balanced and complete to fulfill the nutritional needs of your pet. If, on the other hand, you decide to use a commercial diet, most of these diets are prescription diets and you will

not find them in a regular pet store. The advantage of these diets is that it eliminates the time in preparing a meal for your pet. We recommend the use of prescription diets- Royal Canin.

### ***Home Care—What You Can Do***

It is important that everybody in the family and friends are aware of the food trial and comply with it. Patience and determination are very important for the success of a food trial. It is important that you are strict and that there are no breaks in the food trial in order to facilitate the interpretation of the results.

No treats (e.g. milk bones, pig ears), flavored medications (e.g. Heartgard Plus, Interceptor, Sentinel, Program), flavored vitamins (or fatty acids/omega 3/6 supplements), flavored chew toys or people food should be allowed during the food trial.

Make sure your garbage is out of access to your pet.

A food trial may become difficult if you have small children in the house- it is important that you pay special attention to food crumbs left by children. Any small amount of food ingested by your pet can cause a break in the food trial.

If you have other pets: all the other pets will need to eat the same home cooked diet or prescription diet. Or, your other pets will need to be fed in a separate area of the house and all food bowls removed after they are finished eating.

Cats on a food trial should not be allowed to have outdoor access, as a cat's hunting abilities could lead to ingestion of foods (i.e. prey) not in the food trial and thus make it difficult to assess how effective a food trial is working.

If your dog is on a food trial and you have a cat(s) in the household- the cat's litter box should be kept away from the dog's access. Litter box "tootsie treats" can also be a source of a break in a food trial.

If you suspect a break in the food trial- make note of this on a calendar and speak with your veterinary dermatologist.

### ***Preventative Care***

There is no effective way to prevent the occurrence of a food allergy. This seems to be related to a genetic predisposition, thus some animals are more predisposed than others to the development of this disease.

Treatment for food allergy is avoidance of the offending food. If avoidance is not possible, or when relapses occur, you may use antihistamines (e.g. Benadryl) to decrease the itching. Secondary infections triggered by the allergy will also need to be treated.

**NOTE:** New food allergies can develop overtime. Thus, if your pet has been previously diagnosed with a food allergy and has been well controlled with a certain diet but now is showing signs of skin disease, it is possible that he/she is developing a new allergy. Please consult with your veterinarian to determine whether this is a possibility or whether there is evidence of another disease.