

Dog Allergies and How to Help

Don't despair — you can help your itchy dog.

Marcia King

"We got her from a rescue," recalls owner Brenda Brush of Connecticut, "and when I picked her up, she was chewing incessantly at her hindquarters. Her skin was red, inflamed, and flaky, and she had a few fleas. I was concerned for her health." Diagnosis: skin and flea allergies.

Most skin allergies are caused by environmental allergens such as dust, mold, dander, and pollen from grass, weeds, and trees, says Mark Macina, DVM, chief of dermatology at the Animal Medical Center in New York. "Food and flea allergies can also produce skin reactions."

When exposed to an allergic substance, allergy-prone dogs get very itchy. Explains Thierry Olivry, Ph.D., American College of Veterinary Dermatology diplomate: "Typically they'll scratch, bite, chew, or rub their face, necks, armpits, groin, rectal area, bottom of the tail, the [bend] of the joints on the limbs, and between the [toes] on top and bottom of the feet."

Continuous scratching, in turn, often leads to scratch marks, hair loss, thickened or darkened skin, dandruff, and greasiness. In some dogs, additional eye and nose allergies cause sneezing and snorting, or watery nasal discharge, says Olivry, an adjunct research associate professor of veterinary dermatology at North Carolina State University.

Additionally, skin allergies can lead to secondary bacterial or yeast infections, something that troubled Lady's owner. "I know that skin irritations can quickly become infected, and must be terribly uncomfortable," Brush says. "I wanted to do everything I could for Lady."

Diagnosis is often made by looking at a dog's history, clinical signs, and her response to drug therapy, but a definitive diagnosis is made through intradermal skin testing, in which the veterinarian injects allergens into the skin and measures the reactions to each.

Unfortunately, allergies cannot be cured, they don't disappear, and usually become worse as your dog ages, Macina says. The good news is that with an appropriate, often multifaceted approach, you can largely control the clinical signs associated with allergies.

Mild, seasonal allergies may be controlled by avoiding the offending allergens, maintaining a good flea control program, bathing frequently with hypoallergenic shampoos, and supplementing with omega-3 and -6 fatty acids, Macina notes, which possess mild anti-inflammatory properties.

Dogs with serious or year-round allergies usually require lifelong allergy shots to build immunity to specific allergens, or drug therapy to maintain relief, often in conjunction with the above treatments.

So far, Lady's allergies are being successfully managed with year-round topical flea medications, daily fatty acid supplements, and therapeutic shampoos every six weeks. Says Brush, "Her problem cleared up quite nicely."

Marcia King is a DOG FANCY contributing editor who lives in Ohio.