

Food Allergies

The classical food allergy lesion distribution includes some or all of the below signs:

- *Facial itching*
- *Foot or limb chewing*
- *Belly itching*
- *Recurrent ear infections*

YOUR CAT'S ITCHY SKIN Itchy skin in the cat is often more than just a minor annoyance. Red, oozing bald patches, rashes, and large expanses of hair loss are unfortunate markers of very real discomfort for which a cause should be sought and specifically dealt with.

The food allergy is one of the itchiest conditions known to cats. Animals eat a variety of processed food proteins, fillers, and colorings which are further processed inside their bodies. Proteins may be combined or changed into substances recognized by the immune system as foreign invaders to be attacked. The resulting inflammation may target the GI tract or other organ systems but in cats, it is the skin that most often suffers from this immunologic activity.

Many people erroneously assume itching due to food allergy requires a recent diet change of some sort. In fact, the opposite is true. ***Food allergy requires time to develop; most animals have been eating the offending food for years with no trouble.***

WHAT KIND OF ALLERGY? Sarcoptic mange and inhalant allergy (also known as "atopy") are the two conditions which must be distinguished from food allergy as the treatment approach to each is markedly different.

Food allergy should be considered if your cat demonstrates:

- YOUR CAT HAS BEEN TREATED FOR SARCOPTIC MANGE WITHOUT ANY POSITIVE CHANGE.
- YOUR CAT'S ITCHINESS IS NOT AND HAS NEVER BEEN A SEASONAL PROBLEM.
- YOUR CAT HAS RESPONDED POORLY OR ONLY PARTIALLY TO CORTISONE-TYPE MEDICATIONS.
- YOUR CAT HAS HAD A SKIN BIOPSY DEMONSTRATING CHANGES OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH ALLERGY OR, MORE SPECIFICALLY, FOOD ALLERGY.
- A LESION DISTRIBUTION PATTERN WHICH IS COMMON FOR FOOD ALLERGY

THE FLEA FACTOR:

Some animals have many allergies. It would not be particularly unusual for an animal with a food or inhalant allergy to also be allergic to flea bites, especially considering that flea bite allergy is an extremely common allergy among cats. Because allergies "add" to each other, it is possible that a food allergic dog will not itch if its fleas are controlled. Since new technology has made flea control safe and convenient, it is especially important (and no longer difficult) to see that fleas are not complicating a cat's itching problem.

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE FOOD ALLERGY SUSPECT: THE HYPOALLERGENIC DIET TRIAL

To determine whether or not a food allergy or intolerance is causing the skin problem, a "hypoallergenic diet" is fed for a set period of time. If the cat recovers, the original diet is fed for up to two weeks to see if itching resumes. If we see recovery with the test diet and itch with the original diet, then food allergy is diagnosed and the cat is returned to either the test diet or another appropriate commercial food indefinitely.

WHAT IS A GOOD HYPOALLERGENIC DIET?

There are two approaches to this question. Obviously, the test diet must be of a food source that the patient could not possibly be allergic to. The traditional method is the use of a "novel" protein and carbohydrate source; that is, something the cat has never eaten before. In the past, lamb has been the protein source of choice as American cat food companies had traditionally failed to produce lamb-based cat foods. Unfortunately, recent production of lamb and rice-based foods have removed lamb from the "acceptable hypoallergenic diet" list.

Fortunately, many cat food companies have discerned the need for diets using unusual protein & carbohydrate sources with a minimum of additives. Foods can be obtained based on venison and potato, fish and potato, egg and rice, duck and pea, and even kangaroo.

It is important that during the diet trial no unnecessary medications be given. No edible chew toys (such as rawhides or bones) should be given. Treats must be based on the same food sources as the test diet. (Beware of Rice cakes, though, as wheat is commonly used as a filler.) Chewable heartworm preventives should be replaced with tablets.

Home cooking was originally the only option felt to be appropriately free of allergens but for most animals these special commercial foods are adequate. Occasionally home cooking ends up being necessary after all.

The Hydrolyzed Protein Method

Recently a new approach has been introduced using diets made from "hydrolyzed proteins." This means that a conventional protein source is used but the protein is broken down into molecules too small to excite the immune system. (Hill's^(TM) Z/D and Ultra Z/D diets)

HOW LONG TO FEED THE TRIAL DIET In the past, four weeks was thought to represent a complete trial period. More recent work has shown that some food allergic animals require eight to ten weeks to respond. This may be an extremely inconvenient period of time for home cooking. Our current recommendation calls for a recheck appointment or phone call after four weeks of diet trial and then again after eight weeks of trial. Eighty percent of food allergic dogs will have responded to diet trial at least partially by six weeks. The Labrador retriever and cocker spaniel appear to require up to 10 weeks of trial diet before showing a response. Some animals may even require a longer period.

All commercial diets mentioned have a 100% guarantee. This means that if your cat doesn't like the food, the food can be returned for a complete refund (even if the bag is opened). This is especially helpful for feline patients, as cats are famous for being choosy about what they are willing to eat.

WHAT TO DO IF THE DIET IS SUCCESSFUL?

To confirm food allergy, return to the original food; itching resumes within 14 days generally if food allergy was truly the reason for the itchy skin. Many people do not want to take a chance of returning to itching if the patient is doing well; it is not unreasonable to simply stay with the test diet if the cat remains free of symptoms.

WHAT TO DO IF THE DIET IS UNSUCCESSFUL?

Generally, an unsuccessful food trial is strongly suggestive that an inhalant allergy is really the primary problem but there are some other considerations that should at least be mentioned: Are you certain that the dog received no other food or substances orally during the trial? Was sarcoptic mange ruled out? Your cat may require a longer diet trial. Are you certain regarding the factor which pointed us toward the food allergy? If your cat has not been biopsied, now may be a good time. If an inhalant allergy has risen to the top of the list, symptomatic relief either via medication, special baths, or allergy shots will likely be necessary. Chronic itchiness can be extremely uncomfortable and prompt relief is our goal as well as yours.