



ATOPY

What is atopy?

Atopy is a common, inherited, itchy dermatitis which occurs when the animal becomes allergic to allergens in the environment (eg pollen, grasses, dust mites)

How does atopy affect my dog?

If your dog has atopy, it will be itchy. An itchy dog doesn't always scratch. He may rub his face or ears, or he may lick and chew his feet.

The itchiness may affect all the body or just one area. Many dogs chew their paws or flap their ears. Some dogs scratch continuously and yet don't damage their skin, whilst others quickly rub themselves raw. Most of the changes seen in the skin are due to your dog scratching, licking or chewing himself (this is known as self-trauma). Signs of atopy may be present in dogs as young as 3 months old. It usually occurs between 1 and 3 years of age. Initially most dogs will only be itchy during certain seasons (eg spring and early summer itching may be due to grass and tree pollens). As your dog ages, these itchy periods become longer. Eventually, he is itchy all year round. This is because with age and exposure to new allergens, your dog becomes increasingly allergic.

What is the allergic threshold of itch?

As mentioned above, with age, your dog will become allergic to more things in its environment. These allergens build on one another. For each dog, there is a specific allergenic load he can tolerate before severe itching starts. If there is a small increase in this load (eg exposure to a certain pollen) then it can push him over the threshold and initiate increased itching.

The concept is useful in the treatment of atopic dogs. By decreasing the allergen load by a certain degree (ie avoid that specific pollen), we can reduce the itch. Whilst avoidance is the best treatment, it is not always possible to identify and avoid offending pollens.

How do we diagnose atopy?

Initially we collect information from you - eg which came first, the itch or the rash? This information is combined with a clinical examination. Tests such as skin scrapings and cytology are done to rule out mites and check for secondary infections that frequently affect the inflamed skin. We also need to rule out flea allergy and food allergy by checking your pet's response to the complete elimination of fleas and also particular proteins in the diet before we can reach a diagnosis of atopy. Once we have established that your dog is atopic, you may wish to identify what he is allergic to. This is best done by Intradermal Antigen Tests although a blood test is used in some cases. Some anti-itch medications affect skin testing and must be withdrawn so that the test can be interpreted correctly. The blood test is less comprehensive but does not require prior withdrawal from medications.

How to we treat atopy?

It is rare to cure atopy. It is mostly controlled by a combination of:

1. Hyposensitization. This involves the repeated small injections of low doses of a combination of allergens (as determined for your pet by Intradermal Antigen testing) to suppress the allergic reaction. This is successful in approximately 70% of atopic pets. They usually require injections for the rest of their lives and can take up to two allergy seasons to provide relief. When effective, these pets can enjoy great allergy control with minimal medication.
2. Antihistamines are helpful in some cases for ongoing control. Often we need to try out a few types before we know if one will help.
3. Essential fatty acids. When taken over a long period, these improve skin condition.
4. Shampoos containing aloe vera and oatmeal may ease itchy skin.
5. Cortisone can offer enormous relief but need to be used under careful supervision to avoid side-effects.
6. Atopica – has fewer side-effects, is often very effective but can be expensive in large dogs in the initial stages.

Skin allergies can be challenging to control and require a systematic approach to diagnose and treatment. With commitment and care, most pets can enjoy a comfortable life despite ongoing exposure to environmental allergens.

Disclaimer: This information is of a general nature only, and must not be used as veterinary advice except where directed by your veterinarian. Hall Veterinary Surgery does not warrant the suitability of this information for specific cases. If your animal is unwell or you want to act on this information, please contact us on 6230 2223.