



## FLEA ALLERGY

### What are allergies, and how do they affect dogs?

One of the most common conditions affecting dogs is allergy. In the allergic state, the dog's immune system "overreacts" to foreign substances (allergens or antigens) to which it is exposed. These overreactions are manifested in three ways. The most common is itching of the skin, either localised (one area) or generalised (all over the dog). Another manifestation involves the respiratory system and may result in coughing, sneezing, and/or wheezing. Sometimes, there may be an associated nasal or ocular (eye) discharge. The third manifestation involves the digestive system, resulting in vomiting or diarrhoea. The specific response that occurs is related to the allergen and the individual animal's immune system.

### What is meant by the term flea allergy?

In spite of common belief, a normal dog experiences only minor skin irritation in response to flea bites. Even in the presence of dozens of fleas, there will be very little itching. On the other hand, the flea allergic dog has a severe, itch-producing reaction to flea bites. This occurs because the dog develops an allergic response to the flea's saliva. When the dog is bitten, flea saliva is deposited in the skin. Just one bite causes intense itching and this is of a long lasting nature.

### What does this reaction do to the dog?

The dog's response to the intense itching is to chew, lick, or scratch. This causes hair loss and can lead to open sores or scabs on the skin, allowing a secondary bacterial infection to begin. The area most commonly involved is over the rump (just in front of the tail). This is probably because fleas find this part of the dog more desirable. Many flea-allergic dogs also chew or lick the hair off their legs.

### What is the proper treatment?

The most important treatment for flea allergy is to get the dog away from all fleas. Therefore, strict flea control is mandatory and this involves ensuring the dog is flea-free and also removing fleas from the environment. We recommend Frontline spray as the most effective product to kill adult fleas and continue protection from 2 weeks to 2 month. Frontline must not be applied within two days before or after a bath as the natural skin oils assist its effect. After 48 hours bathing may occur without washing off all the product. Once flea control is achieved with this spray, maintenance with one of the simpler to use "Top" spot products can be tried. If the environment is heavily infested it is worthwhile treating these fleas as well. Unfortunately, complete flea control is invariably difficult, particularly with dogs living outdoors in summertime when the weather is warm and humid, where a new population of fleas can hatch out every seven days.

When strict flea control is not possible, corticosteroids can be used to block the allergic reaction and give relief. This is often a necessary part of dealing with a flea allergy. Dogs are more resistant to the side-effects of steroids than humans, but significant side-effects can occur. For this reason, the goal is to administer the smallest amount of steroid needed to keep the dog comfortable. Some dogs develop a secondary bacterial infection in the skin. When this occurs, appropriate antibiotics must be used and steroid therapy reduced even further.

The development of more effective and persistent flea products like Frontline has greatly reduced the use of corticosteroids in flea-allergic dogs.