



## **DORSET STREET**

ANIMAL HOSPITAL

**What is my pet so itchy?** The most common causes of itchiness in pets are skin parasites and allergies. Both conditions are uncomfortable and may cause inflammation and pain to your pet.

**What are skin parasites?** Skin parasites that most frequently cause itching include fleas and sarcoptic mange mites (scabies). Fleas or flea dirt can usually be seen on pets, but sometimes pets are itchy with only a few fleas or groom themselves so much we don't actually see them. Scabies is less common, and can be picked up from foxes or other dogs. It is very contagious and very itchy - typically at ears, elbows and hocks (ankles). Though they can sometimes be seen under a microscope, mites are generally very hard to find, so we recommend treating with Credelio or Bravecto because these will treat most cases of scabies and control for fleas.

**What Are Allergies?** An allergy is an overreaction of the immune system to a harmless substance called an allergen. People with allergies usually have "hay fever" (watery eyes, runny nose and sneezing) or asthma. While dogs and cats can also have respiratory allergies, it's more common to see allergies show up as skin problems - usually redness and itching, repeated skin or ear infections, and hair loss.

### **What Are the Major Causes of Allergies in my pet?**

- **Flea Allergies:** Flea Allergic Dermatitis (FAD) is the most common skin disease in dogs and cats. This allergy is caused by the flea's saliva. It only takes a single bite to cause a reaction, so you may not actually see the fleas. For the flea allergic patient, 100% flea control is needed for the pet to remain itch-free. Because flea allergy is so common, we recommend that complete flea control be in place before testing for other allergies. The best possible flea control means year-round medication for all pets in the house. The products that we consider effective enough to control for flea allergy are Credelio, Bravecto and the other oral flea and tick preventatives for dogs. Cheristin, Bravecto and Revolution are excellent topical preventatives for cats. In some cases a Seresto collar may be adequate as well.
- **Food Allergies:** Some pets develop allergies to something in their diets. The allergen usually is a protein and the most common allergens include beef, chicken, pork, fish, corn, wheat, or soy. As with any allergy, it only takes one bite to create itchiness. A pet can become allergic to something they have been eating for years. The diagnosis of food allergy is made by feeding a special prescription diet for a period of 10-16 weeks. The pet must not eat anything else during this test period. If the itchiness and infections improve, a challenge is performed by feeding the old diet and watching for a return of the itching. There is no blood test for food allergy.
- **Environmental Allergies (Atopic Dermatitis):** Atopic dermatitis (atopy) is an allergy to things in the environment such as pollen from weeds, grasses and trees, storage or house dust mites, and mold spores. These allergies can be year round or seasonal. Atopy can be diagnosed by blood tests or skin tests. We can either perform a preliminary test to get a general sense of the groups of things a patient is allergic to, or we can test for specific allergens, letting us create desensitization treatment (allergy shots) to help the immune system react less. Skin testing is generally performed by dermatology specialists while blood testing is done by general practitioners.

**What happens if I don't control my pet's itchiness?** Allergies are usually the cause of skin and ear itching, but overgrowth of bacteria and yeast can make allergic pets much itchier and make things much harder to control. When a patient is allergic, their skin's natural barrier is less effective than normal. Then, licking and scratching further weaken the skin's ability to defend against bacteria and yeast. Managing a pet's allergies means both controlling the itch and controlling secondary infections. Long term treatment with antibiotics and anti-yeast medications is usually required, along with medicated bathing programs. Many studies have shown that dogs that are itchy also have behavioral problems because they don't feel well. **How do I help my pet?**

- **Medications:** There are several medications that we can use to control itching. The best options are either a shot (cytopoint) that stops itchiness for 1-2 months or a pill (apoquel) that is given daily. Steroids can be used as well, but only for short term treatment as there can be some bad side effects with long term use. **Supplements:** Omega-3 fatty acid supplements, which are mainly found in fish oil, help with allergies in two ways. First, they help seal the skin, improving its ability to keep out allergens and infections. Second, they help reduce inflammation and calm the immune system, and thus reduce the allergic reaction. For allergic dogs, these dietary supplements should be given at pretty high doses, so we recommend a concentrated product called Welactin. If you are using a different supplement, please ask us to help calculate the right dose for your pet. **Diet:** Pets with food allergies usually require special food to help manage itchiness. These foods are picked on a pet by pet basis. There is a prescription food (Hill's Science Diet DermDefense) that can be very helpful for dogs with environmental allergies (atopy). The food has high levels of omega-3 fatty acids as well as a natural supplement that works like benadryl.

**Can I cure my pet's allergies?** Unfortunately, there is no cure for allergies so they are usually a life-long problem. We aim to control allergy symptoms and improve the quality of life for both you and your pet. We will work to come up with the best plan of diet and medications that fits your and your pet's needs.