

What Does a Dermatologist Do Anyway? When a Pet Should See a Dermatologist

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Why am I talking about this? Because I've never heard a client say to me, "I'm so mad at my veterinarian for referring me to a dermatologist." But I've heard on numerous occasions a frustrated client express, "I'm so mad at my veterinarian for not sending us to a dermatologist sooner." And clients spend as much or more time talking to technicians and support staff than they do to the doctors. How can you help keep your clinic's clients happier and less frustrated?

Background: What Is It Like Dealing With Skin Problem?

Skin / Ear Problems Are Common

A Veterinary Pet Insurance 2012 database survey of almost 500,000 insured pets found the top diagnoses reported in the dog were skin allergies, ear infection and skin infection. Itching (pruritus) is among the most frequent complaints of pet owners, affecting roughly 1 in 6 dogs that seek veterinary help.¹

Skin Problems: As Frustrating As They Are Common

Most dermatologic problems (such as environmental allergies, aka, atopic dermatitis or AD) are not curable, but need to be managed long term. This is frustrating for owners, vets and veterinary staff. A dermatology referral clinic in France asked owners of dogs diagnosed with AD questions about their pets' skin treatments and experiences prior to be referred to a dermatologist. Two of the main complaints were based in frustration: lack of a cure and the emotional impact of the disease.²

Owners, out of efforts to save money on vet visits, try changing diets without veterinary guidance, try unproven but well-advertised "therapies" such as supplements and herbal remedies or totally invalid commercial "allergy tests." Often by the time they bring a pet to their veterinarian, they've spent more on these things than the cost of an exam, and they arrive in the exam room already frustrated and financially tapped.

Adding to the Frustration: Many Skin Problems Look Alike

For example, the symptoms of food allergy and environmental allergies can look exactly alike. Sometimes fungal infections look like immune-mediated diseases. And we lack simple and accurate tests for the most common problem, allergies. This is not only frustrating for everyone who wants a quick and easy diagnosis, it leads to a higher likelihood of a wrong initial diagnosis. This is not (usually) the fault of the clinician but just a fact of dealing with dermatitis. When a pet fails to respond to a prescribed treatment, the owner gets frustrated, loses confidence in the veterinarian, and seeks another opinion. Often we fail to explain to the owner how often skin diseases look alike and special diagnostics are needed to determine the problem.

Chronic Disease Means Chronic Medications

Many pet owners are not satisfied to keep their pets on medications long term without being convinced of the need to do so. For many this means exploring other options, even the likelihood of success is relatively low, to assure themselves they have done the best they can for their pet. And medications are expensive, another stress for pet owners.

We Humans Need a Plan

It is important that we convey to pet owners that in dermatology cases we often have to take an approach of ruling out one thing at a time, make our best assessment, assess the pet's response, and that *we have a plan* if the pet does not respond to our treatment. The study from France cited 44% of pet owners complained of "absence of clear treatment decision and / or plan" by their primary care vets.² A study published in a human psychology

journal in 2011 suggested that having a plan toward meeting a goal may “free cognitive resources” (aka brain space!) “for other pursuits” as well as help reach the goal. In short, we feel and function better when we have a plan.³ But, we (veterinary professionals) are not always good at expressing this to our clients. Often we lack the *time* in the appointment to explain all that we would like our clients to know.

Are General Practitioners Adept at Treating Skin Problems?

The primary care veterinarian is absolutely the first place a pet owner should turn if their pet has skin problems. Primary care vets can address many issues, assess for mites, infection, check for fleas, give guidance on diet management. As discussed, many pets have chronic problems that will bring them back repeatedly. And after 3 to 4 visits for the same problem without a long term plan or discussing the reality of chronic skin problems, pet parents become frustrated, even if their doctor is very competent. This is more problematic in multi-doctor clinics where clients see different doctors.

Educating pet owners about allergies takes time, usually more than the average 15-20 minute appointment can accommodate. Some primary care vets make skin appointments 30-45 minutes long.

Another concern is that dermatology has become an elective in some veterinary schools. Six of the 30 schools in the country have no full-time dermatologist, so these students do not have a dermatology rotation in their clinical year unless taken as an elective. I have personal knowledge of veterinarians who feel inadequately trained in dermatology after graduating from school; they have not had experience with the cases nor with the “human side” of dermatology cases and are frequently frustrated or lack confidence in recommendations. Even clinicians who had good dermatology exposure in school find it very frustrating. Heck, dermatologists are frustrated by dermatology cases!

What Can a Dermatologist Offer That a General Practitioner Cannot?

1) Greater knowledge base: A veterinary dermatologist is a veterinarian who has had specific training (a 2-3 year long residency) and experience in the diagnosis and treatment of animal skin, ear, hair, nail, hoof and mouth disorders. Specifically veterinary dermatologists have significant training and experience in the management of allergic skin disease.⁴ Dermatologists may have the insight or experience to look at a pet and more confidently diagnose a problem or have more knowledge about the appropriate diagnostic tests (such as culture or biopsy).

2) We know *when* to do, *how* to do, and how to *interpret* allergy tests, both intradermal and blood tests. Blood allergy tests are accessible to primary care clinicians; skin testing is most often done by dermatologists, taking some special skill, access to testing allergens, and knowledge of the allergens. We believe the skin test is somewhat more accurate than the blood tests. Knowing *when* to do the test is also important (for example, doing a food trial first), as well as how to interpret the results (for example, how inaccurate food allergy test results are; what does it mean if there is a reaction to something not in the pet’s environment.)

3) We have experience with managing allergen immunotherapy (AIT), the reason for doing allergy testing. Dermatologists are a little more familiar with the allergens, what is present when, which ones cross-react, etc., to help formulate the AIT. Immunotherapy is not a cookie cutter or “one size fits all” treatment. Not only do pet’s have different reactions, each immune system responds differently to AIT and it must be adjusted based on the pet’s response. This means regular communications with pet owners (not just visits but phone updates, emails) and having at least one support staff member (usually a technician) with knowledge and experience to answer questions for the doctor.

4) Expertise with biopsies: Some skin conditions require biopsy and histopathology for diagnosis. Like allergy testing, when to do this, what sample to take, how to take it, and to whom to send for histopathology are all important factors in getting a diagnosis and therefore appropriate treatment.

5) Otitis cases: Most cases of recurrent ear infections are from underlying allergies. Sometimes ear infections are the only symptom, and it is so tempting to just treat the ear problems as they occur. But after time, the infections worsen and the clients begin to wonder why are they seeing their vet to do the same thing over and over? A dermatologist will take time to discuss with the client the possible underlying causes of the infections and how to address them. Many dermatologists have video-otoscopes for more thorough evaluation of the ear canal.

6) Time: Because of the complexity and often long history of dermatology cases, dermatologists often allot 1 to 1.5 hrs for the new appointments to listen to the clients, take a thorough history and evaluate the pet. Clients are appreciative of the time given to them.

7) Initials behind the name. It's silly. Specialists are not necessarily smarter than any other veterinarian, but when clients hear advice from a board-certified specialist, they are more likely to trust our assessment and hopefully comply with recommendations.

What are Signs That a Pet with Skin Problems Should Be Referred?

1) *The pet has been seen for same problem 3 or more times ("gets better but it comes back") within 12-18 months without a diagnostic plan.* As technicians checking in pets for exams and discussing prescribed medications with clients, you are knowledgeable and in a position to look at the pet's chart for similar previous visits, and to listen to what the clients say about their pet's issues. Most clients are going to begin to feel some frustration by the 3rd visit if there is no plan to find a cause.

If you notice signs of rejection of treatment recommendations or frustration from the client such as eye rolling, heavy sighs, clenched fists, even light-hearted humor at their misfortune of having a pet with allergies, this is a clue they are ready for someone to take charge of getting long term comfort for their pet.

2) *The pet is not responding to appropriate treatment.* This goes back to the "many skin diseases look alike." We've guessed the incorrect diagnosis and the pet is not getting better or worsening. At a minimum these pets need to see the primary care vet again. The doctor may feel it's time for biopsy or other diagnostics; they may want to refer for this. Sometimes it is time for a fresh set of eyes on the case.

3) *A change in the skin condition / rapidly progressing dermatitis.* A significant change in a skin problem (for the worse) is alarming to both pet owners and veterinarians. It can be a sign of a very serious disorder and appropriate tests done in a timely manner can be critical.

4) *When the client is saying "I've tried everything I can think of...I've done everything the doctor has said to do... I've looked up allergies on the internet...."* Clients (we humans in general) can drive ourselves absolutely crazy trying to fix our own problems. But when we lack professional oversight, there is always a nag in our heads "am I thinking of everything? What about this? What about that?" These clients benefit much from talking with a specialist so they have a more confident plan and education about their pet's skin problems.

How and to Whom Do You Suggest Referral Diplomatically?

When you suspect a pet with recurrent skin / ear problems would benefit from referral, it is helpful to briefly summarize the pet's visits for the doctor before they see the patient to point out the recurring nature of the problem, and to give the doctor a heads up to any client frustrations. This is best expressed as "our client is a little frustrated with *the problem* (not us) and might feel better if we or a dermatologist discusses the possible underlying problems in greater depth." And even if referral is not recommended or not accepted, you've done the pet, the client and the vet a great service by summarizing what has been done so far and encouraged taking time to investigate the issues.

When talking to clients on the phone / between their appointments, it may be acceptable to say, "Gosh, I realize you are concerned and frustrated (or whatever emotion the client is feeling); maybe we should talk to the doctor

about a more extended appointment time to investigate the underlying problem more thoroughly, or possibly if Rosco should see a dermatologist.”

If there is a take-away message to pass along, it is that we’ve never heard a client say they were unhappy their vet recommended a referral, but many times we’ve heard clients complain they were not referred sooner, that they found specialty care by doing an internet search. Let the client know you have their and their pets’ health as your top priority.

References:

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3. Masicampo, E. J., & Baumeister, R. F. Consider It Done! Plan Making Can Eliminate the Cognitive Effects of Unfulfilled Goals. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. Advance online publication. (2011, June 20). doi: 10.1037/a0024192
4. ACVD (American College of Veterinary Dermatology) Website: <http://www.acvd.org>. This website has information about the types of problems dermatologist see, has some before and after photos of some common conditions, and contact information for dermatologists around the country.