Allergies & Skin Disorders in Pets

Skin disorders are extremely common in dogs and cats. The most common reason for skin problems in our pets is an underlying allergy. A veterinary exam is an important first step in eliminating other causes of itching, including fleas or infection.

If your veterinarian refers you to a dermatologist, it is because he or she sees a chronic or serious issue that is best dealt with by a specialist. Veterinary dermatologists have had specialty training for 2 to 3 years after veterinary school and have passed a certification exam given by the American College of Veterinary Dermatology.

Allergy Testing
Allergy testing can help your veterinarian design an immunotherapy program. Allergy testing is done by a blood test or a skin test (intradermal allergy test, or IDAT). The IDAT is considered the "gold standard" in allergy testing. This test involves small injections of the most common allergens.

Immunotherapy Treatment
Immunotherapy involves giving a pet injections of allergens in small, but increasing, quantities. The goal is to "retrain" the pet’s immune system to be less reactive to those allergens and, therefore, prevent the symptoms of the allergy. Approximately 70% of dogs and 50-60% of cats respond to this treatment.

Atopic Dermatitis/Atopy
Atopy, or inhalant allergy, is a hypersensitivity reaction to environmental allergens such as pollens, mold spores, dust and dust mites. The most common signs of this allergy are itching of the belly and "arm pits," face rubbing, foot licking, and recurrent ear and skin infections. Diagnosis is based on the pet’s history of skin problems, lack of response to dietary restriction, lack of response to external parasite treatment, and results of allergy testing (skin and blood tests). Treatments for this life-long condition are medications such as antihistamines, steroids, cyclosporine and topical medications to minimize itching, or immunotherapy.

Food Allergies & Food Trials
Just like people, pets can have food allergies. For dogs, the most common food allergens are beef, wheat, pork, corn, chicken, dairy products, and eggs. The most common sign of food allergy is year-round itching. Dogs with food allergies often rub their face or ears, lick their feet, and often "scoot" on their behind. Ear and skin infections are common. Cats often have intense scratching and crusting on the head and neck, and may lick the hair off their belly.

A period of diet restriction or a food trial is the only way to determine if a pet has a food allergy. The most important (and most difficult) part of a food trial is restricting what the pet eats to the trial diet only. This means eliminating all other treats, snacks, supplements, rawhide, pig ears, flavored chews, bones, and even flavored medications. Some pets improve in 2-3 weeks; some take 2-3 months. A minimum of 8 weeks on a restricted diet is recommended. Food allergies are a life-long condition; therefore, pets should continue to avoid eating the foods they are found to be allergic to.