

## Pets with allergies: An overview

Licking, chewing, scratching, and rubbing as well as recurrent skin and ear infections and hot spots are common signs of allergies in pets. The areas commonly affected include the feet, belly, armpits, face, ears, neck, rump, and thighs, and secondary infections are common in these areas. Other conditions including those caused by parasitic and infectious organisms may result in similar symptoms, so Dr. Buerger will need to understand your pet's medical history and perform a thorough dermatologic examination as well as a few basic tests to be certain that allergy is indeed the problem. Allergic symptoms can be year-round or they can be seasonal (during particular season(s)) depending upon which allergies are present. Allergies usually begin between 6 months and 3 years of age, but may begin at any time. Retrievers, terriers, and shepherds are more likely to have problems with allergies than other breeds. The tendency to develop allergies runs in families (as in people). Unlike people, pets with allergies seldom "outgrow" them, and their allergies commonly get worse and less responsive to treatments with each passing year.

The symptoms of allergy can often be improved or controlled with one or more of the following: antihistamines, nutritional fatty acid supplements, cortisone (i.e. prednisone) tablets, frequent shampoos, strict flea control, and in some instances restricted diets. These treatments are an acceptable means of control if the allergic symptoms are seasonal and of short duration (one to several months) and as long as the treatments do not result in severe or objectionable side effects. Allergy testing and more specific therapy with allergy injections should be considered in the following instances:

- (1) If the problem is prolonged (especially if it is year-round);
- (2) If the problem is not adequately controlled with symptomatic treatments;
- (3) If the treatment necessitates prolonged or repeated courses of cortisone drugs or antibiotics; or
- (4) If the treatments cause severe or objectionable side effects.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to discuss them with Dr. Buerger during your next appointment.

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## Allergy skin testing for dogs and cats



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# Allergy Testing for Pets: Questions and Answers

## **What does allergy testing entail?**

If your pet's allergies are year-round (nonseasonal) to any degree an evaluation for food allergy may be recommended first which entails feeding a very strict hypoallergenic diet for 10 weeks. In cases where there is a seasonal fluctuation of the problem Dr. Buerger may ask that the special diet be fed during the cold winter months. Dr. Buerger will discuss the details of the diet if it is deemed necessary.

If the allergy is present only during a particular time each year or if there is no response to the special diet then allergy skin testing should be performed. A patch is shaved on the side of the chest and 65 small injections are made into the skin. This is often done with your pet sedated and while you wait (usually takes about 30 minutes). Redness and/or swelling at the injection sites allows us to determine which allergies are present.

## **What is the benefit of allergy skin testing?**

After the cause of the allergy has been determined, it can then be treated more specifically. Allergies can be treated with an injectable allergy vaccine or "serum" that is tailored to the pet's particular allergies.

## **Are allergies to flea bites treated with allergy injections?**

Unfortunately, injections for flea bite allergies do not work in most instances. Strict flea control measures must be implemented for allergic pets.

## **Are there alternatives to allergy skin testing?**

If skin testing is not performed it is usually possible to control the symptoms of the allergy with antihistamines and/or cortisone drugs. These medications may have side effects, and the long-term use of cortisone drugs in particular is potentially harmful. Other treatments with fatty acid nutritional supplements and shampoos may also be of benefit.

Blood allergy testing may be recommended in place of skin testing under certain conditions. Concurrent medical conditions or other skin issues may prompt a recommendation to perform blood allergy testing first.

## **When is the best time to skin test?**

The skin test can be performed anytime, but for some seasonally allergic pets the best results may be obtained near the end of the allergy season (often in the early fall months). If the skin test is performed at a time other than at the end of the pet's allergy season it may be necessary to repeat a portion of the test in the fall and modify the allergy vaccine accordingly.

## **How often are allergy injections given?**

In the initial stages, the injections are given on alternate days. Gradually the length of time between the injections increases to once every three weeks. For some pets the injection schedule may be modified. Allergy injections will likely be necessary for the life of the patient.

## **Who gives the allergy injections?**

With guidance, many owners can learn how to give the injections themselves. The technique is simple, and adverse reactions to the allergy vaccine are very rare. Alternatively, your regular veterinarian could administer the allergy injections.

## **How long does it take to see benefit from the allergy injections?**

While some pets improve within several weeks, most pets require 6 to 9 months of therapy to see benefit. Some may take one or two years to respond. The response to the vaccine may be total (in which case other medications are no longer necessary) or it may be partial. If it is partial, other medications may still be necessary to help control some of the symptoms, but often in lesser amounts.

During the first few months of the injection program, many pets will require additional medications (such as an antihistamine or a cortisone drug) to help alleviate the symptoms. As the allergy injections take effect, and as the symptoms subside, these medications should be stopped if possible.

Approximately 25% of allergic pets do not respond to the injections.



## **How is the pet prepared for the allergy skin test?**

Cortisone tablets such as prednisone, Vetalog, or Medrol must be stopped at least 3-4 weeks prior to allergy testing (longer in some instances). The waiting period may be considerably longer if the cortisone has been given by injection. Consult your veterinarian before stopping the cortisone as a gradual withdrawal may be recommended. Cortisone-containing eye and ear drops should be stopped 7-10 days prior to the test if possible.

Antihistamines such as Benadryl, hydroxyzine (Atarax), and chlorpheniramine must be stopped at least 7-10 days prior to allergy testing.

The pet should not be fed within 12 hours of the skin test, and water should be withheld for 2 hours before the test. No tranquilizer should be given without first checking with Dr. Buerger.

## **What is the cost of allergy skin testing?**

The cost of the skin test is \$195, however with the office visit, sedation (if necessary), additional tests (if necessary), and medications (if necessary), and after the first set of treatment vials are ordered, the total cost may be \$600-900+.

## **Once the results are known, what is the cost of giving allergy shots?**

The first 3 vials costs \$194 and should last about 3 months. This cost is included in the estimate above. Subsequent vials will cost \$184 and should last about 7 months each. The cost of syringes is extra. The cost of the allergy vaccine may be higher for certain types of allergies.

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