

ATOPY/ ALLERGIC SKIN



Atopy (also referred to as “atopic dermatitis”) is a common canine and feline condition in which allergens present in the environment cause an allergic reaction in the skin.

Common allergens include pollen (from grasses, trees, and weeds), mould spores and house dust/house dust mite.

Animals with atopy become very itchy; this leads to trauma to the skin and secondary skin infections. Atopy is usually first noticed in dogs and cats younger than 3 years of age, although older pets can also be affected. Unfortunately, pets that develop atopy are usually plagued by skin problems throughout their lives. Many need lifelong treatment in order to keep them comfortable.



Signs and Identification

Atopic dermatitis is characterized by the variable presence of itching, redness, pustules (infected pimples), wheals (like hives), and crusts. The skin on the face, legs, feet, belly, underarms, groin and ears are most often affected, but no area of the body is off limits. In dogs, ear infections are very commonly associated with atopy.

Cats usually display signs of excessive licking in a symmetrical pattern (on the belly, back, and behind the legs is most common) and/or they can develop tiny scabs around the neck, tail base, or elsewhere on the body.



A hallmark of atopic dermatitis is that signs tend to be seasonal and tend to wax and wane in severity. However, pets that are allergic to house dust mites or other indoor allergens can have year-round problems, because exposure to indoor allergens is not dependent on season of the year.

How is Atopy diagnosed?

Most pets are diagnosed based on signs, history, and response to treatments, but getting to a definitive diagnosis can be a complicated affair. We will normally perform some tests on your dog's skin to determine if they have any parasites or secondary infections and also recommend an exclusion diet to see if your pet is allergic to their food. Approximately 25% of dogs with allergies have an allergy to a component of their food, so it is worth a strict food trial to rule this in or out.



Given that every affected animal suffers a highly individualised version of the disease, determining what an animal is allergic to may also require serum testing (blood testing).

How is Atopy treated?

Four categories of treatment have been described. They comprise:

1. Avoidance (removing allergens from the environment or changing environments altogether)

This is typically undertaken only after a list of allergens is identified via blood testing. Sometimes this isn't possible, for example with pollen allergies, but there are ways to reduce exposure, once we know what the offending allergen is.

2. Symptomatic therapy

Antihistamines: have few side effects compared with some other therapies. However, some pets will not respond to antihistamines alone.

Fatty acid supplements: Special fatty acid supplements may help reduce skin inflammation and are often used in combination with other medications. They help to improve the skin barrier, which makes the skin less likely to react to the allergens.

Topical treatments: Medicated shampoos, mousses and ointments can relieve a pet's itching or help with secondary conditions such as fungal infections, bacterial infections, and scaling. They can also help to improve the barrier function of the skin.

Treatment should be repeated frequently for best results, but be sure to follow all label directions carefully.

Anti-itchy medications (dogs only): Oclacitinib tablets and monoclonal antibody injections. Oclacitinib is a once daily itchy relief tablet. Monoclonal antibody therapy is a modern treatment that neutralises the itchy signal to the brain for 4-8 weeks in a single injection.

3. Immunotherapy

(using specific allergens to desensitize a pet to the proteins)

Once a list of “problem” allergens is identified via a blood sample, small quantities of these allergens can be formulated specifically for your pet. Through injection of small amounts of the allergy serum over time, many pets experience a reduced response to the allergens.

This treatment, called immunotherapy, generally must be continued for several months to years to achieve results.

4. Immunosuppressive therapy

(with corticosteroids like prednisone, cyclosporine, or other drugs)

Unfortunately, some pets’ atopic disease cannot be controlled by any of the above approaches and their quality of life may suffer drastically unless more intensive drug therapy is initiated:

Steroids: Drugs like prednisone or dexamethasone, which are called corticosteroids, are often used because they tend to be very effective and safe for short-term use. These medications can be given by injection, by mouth, or as topical ointments or sprays. Corticosteroids can provide immediate relief but may have undesirable side effects, such as increased appetite, thirst, and urination. In some cases, repeated or long-term use of steroids can be associated with an increased risk of medical problems such as liver problems, adrenal gland problems, and diabetes. Corticosteroids in the form of a spray are much less likely to cause the above side effects, but this can still occur with heavy use.

Cyclosporine: Cyclosporine can be used to control atopic dermatitis in dogs and allergic dermatitis (including atopy) in cats. The medication is given once a day for 4 weeks (4 to 6 weeks in cats, based on response). After that, the dose can be tapered to every other day or twice weekly, as needed to maintain effectiveness.

Atopy, or allergic skin disease, can be very frustrating for an owner, and very uncomfortable for the pet. The approach to diagnosis needs to be collaborative and often means repeated check-ups to assess response or progress. However, your pet’s comfort is the end goal, and there are plenty of options to achieve that goal.

Further Reading

[Skin allergies and Atopic Dermatitis](#)

Itchy cats