

## ***Feet Chewers and Face Rubbers!***

*By George Cuellar, DVM, Diplomate ABVP C/F*

It's that time of year again; time for May flowers and all the pollen and the severe allergies typical of Woodland Hills. Because of the dryness and abundant weeds, trees, and grasses we live in pollen central where pollen counts remain high or very high.

Allergy season has come early and hit with a wheezing vengeance this year, thanks largely to an unusually warm winter. Abundant pollen is causing watery eyes, sniffles and sneezing in people. In some areas, allergists say pollen counts this week are as high as they've ever recorded. The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America says more than 40 million Americans have nasal allergies, popularly called hay fever. In severe cases, sufferers have difficulty breathing that can send them to the emergency room. But, what about our pets? Don't they have allergies too?

Dogs and cats react very differently and allergies seem to affect much more dogs than cats. You don't see much sneezing and runny eyes though. Instead, dogs chew their feet, rub their face, scoot, shake their head, scratch their ears, scratch their bellies, and are just generally very itchy and uncomfortable. Our French Bulldog, Lucy, just sucks on the bottom of her feet and then goes out and rubs up and down the stucco on the side of the house when she is very itchy.

Allergies can be managed but not cured which comes as a shock to some. We all wish there was a cure. There are many strategies for allergies but they all encompass three basic areas, proper diagnosis, effective treatment, and a long term management plan. First, we need a diagnosis and that can only be done through a veterinarian by providing a good history and having a physical examination. Next is treatment for the itching and the "effects" of itching. Lastly, there is the maintenance plan that includes medications, frequent bathing, possible food changes, and strict flea control.

The medical term for inhaled allergies in dogs is Atopy or Atopic Dermatitis. Pollens are inhaled or land on the skin. They cause direct allergic response leading to itching. At first, there is just itching without redness or rash. However, other allergies can also cause the same symptoms. Allergies such as food allergies, contact allergies, and flea allergies can be mistaken for inhaled allergies. These all need to be considered and ruled out before a true diagnosis of atopy is made.

The licking chewing and scratching our dogs do pushes hair follicles into the skin with staph bacteria leading to the effects of itching. These effects are what most people see as rashes, infections, hot spots and ear infections. The cause of all these problems is the constant licking, chewing, and scratching. In addition, allergies can affect the ears and ear infections are very common. So, treatments have to consider both the allergies and all the other secondary skin and ear problems.

Treatments may include a variety of anti-inflammatory corticosteroids, antibiotics, antifungals, antihistamines, nutritional supplements, medicated shampoos, allergy vaccines (desensitization), Atopica, ear cleaners, ear medications, and special diets. Knowing which combination and strategy to use is quite the art. Also, some of the medications can have side effects so it is good for the plan to be monitored.

I am often asked what can be done at home to get some relief for a little while and the answer is a cool bath. I like high quality medicated shampoos. These are only sold through veterinarians, so in a pinch other methods can be used. First, avoid oatmeal shampoos because they seem to worsen the problem.

Avoid most human shampoos and any shampoos that have conditioners added. Avoid hot water because the itching will worsen. Instead, try Dawn dishwashing liquid because it is very gentle when used on pets and is an excellent detergent. Dilute half and half with water, soap up starting feet first, then rinse well down starting back first (feet last). RINSE WELL. Another shampoo I use often is Selsun Blue the original or regular version. Dilute half and half with water and wash the same way (feet first). Only use these once in a pinch until you can see your veterinarian. Our website has other bathing tips.

Do not use over the counter medications unless instructed by a veterinarian.

Overall, allergies come two times a year, in the spring and fall. So if you are sneezing with runny eyes and your dog is going to town on his or her feet, it is time to get checked and get on a plan.

*Addendum:* I think it's important to discuss separately the relationship of food to allergies. Food allergies as a sole diagnosis do exist in both dogs and cats. Dogs usually itch as described in the article and may have occasional GI signs such as soft stool or excess gas. Cats, on the other hand, rarely have skin signs and instead have mostly GI signs such as periodic vomiting of undigested food and or soft stool. Nutrition is important and good quality foods are available but food allergy is different. About 10% of allergic dogs seem to have food allergy and about 15% seem to have a food component (a partial allergy to food). The amount of food allergy in cats is unknown but it seems to be a good percentage of our cases. The most common allergic food for dogs in our practice is chicken, followed by wheat, and then corn. The most common allergenic foods in cats are fish, followed by wheat gluten (found in many canned foods), and corn gluten. For dogs with allergies using an "elimination diet" is an important part of any strategy. This means feeding a hypoallergenic diet for 6-8 weeks and measuring the response. While there are many supposed hypoallergenic diets on the market only a few have worked for us in this practice. Even these, however, can still cause GI upset in pets. So, if this happens, stop and use another diet. We recommend two over the counter diets for dogs of mainly fish protein from Wellness or Taste of the Wild (White Fish and Sweet Potato, or Salmon). We use two prescription diets. The first is Royal Canin Hypoallergenic. This is a "hydrolyzed" diet where the proteins (in this case soy) are broken down into very small particles. These particles are not recognized by the body as an allergen. The other is Iams Kangaroo and Oats available online. When these do not work, we trial a diet of home cooked pork and pumpkin for 6-8 weeks. In cats it is important to read the ingredients of each canned food to eliminate fish, wheat, or corn. Canned food only diets in our experience are healthier and will help with obesity and diabetes in all cats. Dry food should be "grain free". There are a few on the market. Overall remember that food is anything taken by mouth. Many vitamin mixtures contain wheat gluten, snacks and treats often have offending allergens. The best thing to do is to eliminate all treats during the food trial. Potential treats that we like to use during this time for dogs is fresh carrots and apples.

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