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Food Allergies

An allergy is an inflammatory immune-system overreaction to a substance your dog's body perceives as "foreign". Although some people blame food for everything from their dog's itchy skin to seizures- true food allergies account for only about 5 to 10 percent of all allergic reactions in dogs. If you suspect your dog is food-allergic, steel yourself for a demanding diagnostic process- and for strict dietary management to make sure no allergy-triggering food passes your dog's lips.

Because the signs of food allergy resemble those of other canine allergies - and because effective treatment depends on pinpointing the allergy causing ingredient diagnosing food allergies is challenging for both owners and veterinarians. If your dog has an immediate adverse reaction to a diet change, the reaction is probably not an allergy because it takes more than one exposure to a food ingredient to incite an allergic reaction. That's why dogs that have been eating the same food for months or years with no problem can suddenly develop a food allergy.

Outside and Inside

The most common sign of food allergy is inflamed, itchy skin- usually around a dog's feet, face, ears, armpits and groin. The attendant scratching and biting can lead to bacterial skin infections and unremitting ear scratching can pave the way for painful earcanal infections.

About 10 to 15 percent of food-allergic dogs experience vomiting and diarrhea instead of- or along with skin problems. "Recent studies suggest that gastrointestinal signs of food allergy may be more common than previously thought," notes Dr. Tim Watson, senior nutritionist at the Waltham Center for Pet Nutrition in Leicestershire, England. Some veterinarians suspect that food allergy is a key component in certain cases of inflammatory bowel disease.

Process of Elimination

If you bring your dog to the animal clinic with "the itchies" and/or digestive distress, your veterinarian will first rule out more common causes of these signs. The rule-out process might include a physical examination and laboratory tests for flea-allergy dermatitis (the most common cause of canine pruritus), inhalant allergies (seasonal reactions to pollen, mold spores, and dust mites), and food intolerance (an acute adverse reaction to food that does not involve the immune system).

Novel Ingredients.

If food allergy remains a subject, your veterinarian will then help you try to pinpoint what might be causing your dog problems. Most food-allergic dogs are hypersensitive to only one or two ingredients, with beef and dairy proteins topping the culprit list. Ingredients that may also cause problems but not as often include grains, pork, chicken, eggs and fish. Allergies to food additives, including preservatives, are rarer still.

To definitively diagnose food allergies, most veterinarians recommend a trial with an elimination diet, a diet that contains a protein and carbohydrate source that dog has never been exposed to. "To select an elimination diet, you have to compile a complete history of all the foods

you know your dog has eaten and the ingredient in them," explains Dr. Lisa Freeman, assistant professor at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine. This painstaking task becomes even trickier if you've adopted an adult dog whose previous dietary history is unknown.

To start with, feed the elimination diet for a period of up to 10 weeks and monitor your dog's response. Signs should abate if your dog is indeed food allergic. Keep in mind that it's difficult to find elimination diets in spite of the plethora of grocery and pet store offerings because most such foods contain similar ingredients. Even the so-called "hypoallergenic" lamb and rice diets are unsuitable as elimination diets for many dogs because they're so popular the main ingredients are no longer truly novel. Consequently, to carry out a valid elimination-diet trial, you may have to either buy a commercial therapeutic diet from your veterinarian (which contains "exotic" ingredients such as rabbit, venison and potato) or prepare a home-cooked diet.

To get conclusive results from the trial, your dog should ingest nothing but the elimination diet and water. That means no treats, rawhide, or chewable medications," cautions Dr. Richard Anderson, staff dermatologist at Angell Memorial Animal Hospital in Boston. Adhering to this strict regimen can be difficult, though, especially for those living in multidog households.

If signs abate after an elimination diet trial, you can assure something in Fido's regular fare is causing the allergy. But to be certain, some veterinarians recommend reintroducing the original diet. A recurrence of signs within 7 to 14 days confirms food allergy.

Mealtime Management.

There is no cure for food allergies. Managing a food allergy means simply avoiding the causative ingredient or ingredients. Medications (such as antihistamines and corticosteroids) that reduce itching caused by other types of allergies usually don't work on food-induced itching.

Long-term avoidance is simply a matter of keeping your dog on the elimination diet you used to diagnose the allergy. Unfortunately, however, some dogs become allergic to ingredients in the elimination diet over time. If this happens to your dog, you'll need to find another nutritionally balanced diet that contains "new" proteins and carbohydrates.

Although diagnosing and managing food allergies is challenging, remember - most dogs are not food-allergic. So don't automatically point your finger at food if your dog has skin and/or digestive problems.