

Dermatitis in Dogs

A guide to sore and itchy allergic skin conditions

Dermatitis

Dermatitis means inflammation of the skin. Many clients also talk to us about their dogs having eczema, which from a medical point of view also means inflammation of the skin. These terms are purely descriptive, they tell us what we see; hair loss, soreness, possibly oozing or discharge and almost invariably an itch. Some cases will occur as a single episode, in case of allergic dermatitis it can be seasonal, or it may wax and wane all year round. However what this does not tell us is the cause of the symptoms, which is where it all becomes very tricky.

Possible causes of dermatitis

There are many different causes of dermatitis, these are:

- a) Parasitic infestations: mites, fleas and tick bites
- b) Microbial infections: bacteria, yeasts and fungi
- c) Allergic dermatitis: food allergy, (inherited) atopic dermatitis and contact allergy
- d) Immune mediated conditions, which are rare

Diagnosis

The skin has very limited means of responding to disease. This means that it is very difficult to tell the exact underlying cause of dermatitis just by examining the patient.

It may take several visits, sometimes even weeks, to reach a definite diagnosis in persistent cases which are usually allergic. This can be a frustrating and difficult time but it is essential to hang in there and work with us as a team to get the bottom of what is causing your dog's problems. The key to successful management is accurate diagnosis and in the long term this will benefit our sore itchy friend.

Clues to diagnosis

There are a number of clues which can help us point in the right direction to get to the bottom of a particular case:

- ❖ Breed: certain breeds are prone to developing allergic disease.
- ❖ Age: The age at which the dermatitis started is a key clue; classically a dog with an inherited allergy will start to develop signs at 2-3 years of age whereas a dog with a food allergy will typically develop signs at less than a year of age. However not every dog has read the textbook and there are always exceptions to these rules, for example inherited allergy has been reported in dogs as young as 12 weeks of age.
- ❖ Location: The area of the body that is affected, e.g. fleas typically causes dermatitis along the top of the back and *Sarcoptes* (Fox mange) typically affects the tummy, ears and face.

- ❖ The response to treatment: E.g. allergic dermatitis is very sensitive to anti-inflammatory doses of steroids and affected dogs will stop scratching almost instantaneously! It is often frustrating to owners, and come to that us, when a dog doesn't respond to appropriate treatment- however don't panic as sometimes this can give vital clues, e.g. 55% of food allergic dogs do not respond to steroids so sometimes this can points us in the right direction.
- ❖ Contact between pets and owners: If other pets or even the owners are also affected by dermatitis this will sometimes point towards something passing from one animal to another or even to us. If you develop a rash at the same time as your dog, you should make an appointment to see your G.P.
- ❖ Most people associate scratching with itchiness but it is worth mentioning that dogs will also bite, lick or chew themselves. There are also varying degrees of itch and we provide clients with a questionnaire designed to determine just how itchy their companion is. This may give some guide as to the cause of the problem, for example, fox mange is typically intensely itchy.

Investigations to obtain a diagnosis

Typically investigations are required to reach a final diagnosis in cases which recur or fail to respond to treatment as we would expect. This is a case of gradually ruling out the different causes one by one. A diagnosis of inherited allergy is reached when all other possible causes of the dermatitis have been ruled out.

A common misconception is that we can diagnose allergy by carrying out blood tests, however this not the case. We will often do blood tests if we are considering immunotherapy (more of which anon) but this is to try and identify the possible causes of the allergy, not the allergy itself. There is also no conclusive scientific evidence that it is possible to identify food allergies by testing a blood sample.

Treatments

So, once we have diagnosed what the problem is, how can we best help your pet? This will depends on the nature of the allergy:

a) Parasitic infestations. We use very effective, broad spectrum anti parasitic spot on medications. In our area we see quite a lot of fox mange and we recommend routine monthly preventative application. This is particularly important if your dog has an allergy as a flea or mite jumping on your dog will cause his allergic condition to flare up.

b) Microbial infections We have a whole range of very effective antimicrobial medications which will be able to resolve infections very effectively.

c) Food allergy This is a rare condition but we do see occasional cases. The scientific evidence suggests the only way to diagnose this condition is by feeding a home cooked or commercial

hypoallergenic diet for a period of 6-8 weeks with absolutely no other food sources.

Diagnosis is confirmed by resolution of signs and relapse when the pet is challenged with 'normal' food. There are commercial diets available, and we recommend Purina HA that can be fed long term to affected individuals but over time dogs can relapse. This is a complicated condition which is difficult to diagnose.

d) Inherited 'atopic' dermatitis This is an inherited form of allergy where the dog develops inappropriate immune reactions to minute particles that float around in the atmosphere all the time: typically pollens or house dust mite faeces. This is a lifelong condition which has no cure but it is possible to manage most cases very well so the dog has a good quality of life. In this case there are two main routes to treatment which at times may overlap:

- ❖ Immunotherapy This means identifying the causal allergens and giving injections of a pure form of what the dog is allergic to, gradually increasing dose up to a point where the dog is having one injection a month. Statistics show about a third of dogs respond well to this therapy, but it also has no effect in about a third of cases.
- ❖ Medical management There are whole books devoted to this subject but these include anti-inflammatory medications, shampoos, food supplements with treatment of concurrent infections etc.

Often it is a case of finding out what works best for your own dog, we will always try and keep medications to the lowest possible effective dose and are very happy to discuss and development a treatment plan with you.

In cases where the condition could be inherited we would strongly advise neutering to prevent this being passed on to future generations.