

If Your Dog Is Itchy or Your Cat Is Wheezy, Read This

Your pet may be miserable right now with seasonal allergies ... but how can you know for sure? Learn how to recognize an allergic pet, how to help your own dog or cat ... and what you must do to prevent your pet's seasonal sensitivities from becoming a year-round problem.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- According to a recent survey, over half of pet owners aren't aware their dog or cat can also be miserable with seasonal allergies in the spring and summer months
- Allergies are extremely common in today's cats and dogs, and take the form of either food or environmental allergies, including seasonal allergies. Some unlucky pets develop allergies in both categories
- Symptoms of seasonal allergies in dogs and cats are most frequently skin-related and include itchiness, inflammation, and hot spots. Allergic animals can also have ear problems and respiratory issues
- Seasonal allergies can turn into a year-round problem if steps aren't taken to prevent exposure, aggressively manage symptoms, and insure your pet's immune system is strong and resilient
- There are many things you as a pet owner can do to help diminish the effects of your pet's allergic condition

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published June 22, 2012.

Did you know your dog or cat can suffer from seasonal allergies just as you do? According to a survey conducted by Novartis Animal Health, over half of pet owners aren't aware their fuzzy family members can also spend the spring season feeling miserable thanks to pollens and other environmental allergens.

Two Categories of Pet Allergies

There are primarily two types of allergies: food allergies and environmental allergies. If your pet gets itchy during spring, summer or fall, she's probably reacting to seasonal, environmental allergens. But if her symptoms continue year-round, it's more likely her sensitivity is to something more constant in her environment, or to something in her diet.

There are a couple of exceptions to this rule, however. If you live in an area that doesn't have a hard freeze in the winter, environmental allergens can build up and cause year-round issues for your pet. In addition, seasonal allergies can progress to year-round allergies, which I'll discuss shortly.

Signs Your Pet Has Seasonal Allergies

Unlike humans whose allergy symptoms usually involve the respiratory tract, dog allergies and cat allergies more often take the form of skin irritation or inflammation – a condition called allergic dermatitis.

If your pet has allergies, her skin will become very itchy. She'll start scratching excessively, and might bite or chew at certain areas of her body. She may rub herself against vertical surfaces like furniture, or she may rub her face against the carpet. She's trying to relieve the miserable itchiness by any means possible.

As the itch-scratch cycle continues, her skin will become inflamed and tender to the touch. Other signs of allergic dermatitis include areas of hair loss, open sores on the skin, and scabbing.

Hot spots can develop as well in dogs (hot spots are rarely seen in cats). A hot spot is inflamed, infected skin that occurs when your dog's natural bacteria overwhelms an area of his skin. Typically the skin will be very red, and often there is bleeding and hair loss.

Other Signs to Watch for

Pets with allergies also often have problems with their ears – especially dogs. The ear canals may be itchy and inflamed as part of a generalized allergic response, or they may grow infected with yeast or bacteria.

Signs your pet's ears are giving him problems include scratching at the ears, head shaking, and hair loss around the ears. If infection is present there will often be odor and a discharge from the ears.

While respiratory symptoms aren't common in pets with allergies, they do occur. A running nose, watery eyes, coughing and sneezing are typical allergic symptoms in both two- and four-legged allergy sufferers.

Typically pets with seasonal allergies to ragweed, grasses, pollens, molds and trees, also develop sensitivity to other allergens inhaled through the nose and mouth. Animals with weaknesses in their lung fields can develop sinusitis and bronchitis, just as people do.

Another sign to watch for if you suspect your pet has allergies is generalized redness. Allergic pets often have puffy red eyes, red oral tissue, a red chin, red paws and even a red anus.

How Seasonal Allergies Can Turn Into Year-Round Allergies

Allergic reactions are produced by your pet's immune system, and the way his immune system functions is a result of both nature (his genetics) and nurture (his environment).

I often see the following history with allergic pets who visit my practice:

- A young pup or kitten, maybe 4 to 6 months old, begins with a little red tummy, itchy ears, and maybe a mild infection in one ear. His regular vet treats the pup symptomatically to provide him some relief.
- The following year as soon as the weather warms up, the pet is brought back to his regular vet with very itchy feet, another ear infection, and a hotspot or two. Again, the vet treats the symptoms (hopefully not with steroids) until the weather turns cold and the symptoms disappear.
- Year three, the same pet suffers from May through September with red, inflamed skin, maybe some hair loss, more hotspots, frequent ear and skin infections, and a tendency to chew his paws or scratch until he bleeds.
- By year five, all the symptoms have grown significantly worse and the animal's suffering is now year-round.

This is what usually happens with seasonal environmental allergies. The more your pet is exposed to the allergens he's sensitive to, the more intense and long-lasting his allergic response becomes.

With my regular patients (those who start out life as patients of my practice), I begin addressing potential root causes at the first sign of an allergic response, which is usually around six months of age. I do this to reduce the risk of an escalating response year after year.

Helping a Pet with Seasonal Allergies

Since the allergen load your environmentally sensitive pet is most susceptible to is much heavier outdoors, two essential steps in managing her condition are regular foot soaks and baths during the warmer months when all those triggers are in bloom.

Dermatologists recommend this common sense approach for human allergy sufferers. If you have hypersensitivities, your doctor will tell you to shower at night and in the morning to remove allergens from the surface of your body. I recommend you do the same for your dog or cat.

- Frequent baths give complete, immediate relief to an itchy pet and wash away the allergens on the coat and skin. Make sure to use a grain free (oatmeal free) shampoo.
- Foot soaks are also a great way to reduce the amount of allergens your pet tracks into the house and spreads all over her indoor environment.
- Keep the areas of your home where your pet spends most of her time as allergen-free as possible. Vacuum and clean floors and pet bedding frequently using simple, non-toxic cleaning agents rather than household cleaners containing chemicals.
- Because allergies are an immune system response, it's important to keep your pet's immune function optimal. This means avoiding unnecessary vaccinations and drugs. And I do not recommend you vaccinate your pet during a systemic inflammatory response. Vaccines stimulate the immune system, which is the last thing your pet with seasonal environmental allergies needs. Talk to your **holistic vet** about titers to measure your pet's immunity to core diseases as an alternative to automatically vaccinating.
- If you haven't already, move your pet to an anti-inflammatory diet. Foods that create or worsen inflammation are high in carbohydrates. Your allergic pet's diet should be very low in grain content.
- Research has shown that 'leaky gut,' or dysbiosis, is a root cause of immune system overreactions, so addressing this issue with a holistic vet is an important aspect of reducing allergic reactions over time.

Allergy-Fighting Supplements

- **Quercetin** — Quercetin is a bioflavonoid with anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. I call it 'nature's Benadryl' because it does a great job suppressing histamine release from mast cells and basophiles.

Histamine is what causes much of the inflammation, redness and irritation characteristic of an allergic response. By turning off histamine production with a quercetin supplement, we can suppress or at least moderate the effects of inflammation.

Quercetin also has some other wonderful properties. It inhibits 5-lipoxygenase, an enzyme that upregulates the inflammatory cascade. Quercetin inhibits the production of leukotrienes, another way the body creates

inflammation, thereby decreasing the level of bronchoconstriction. Bronchoconstriction occurs in the lung fields as a symptom of asthma. Quercetin can actually suppress how much constriction occurs.

- **Bromelain and papain** — Bromelain and papain are proteolytic enzymes that increase the absorption of quercetin, making it work more effectively. They also suppress histamine production.

One of the reasons I use quercetin, bromelain and papain together is they also suppress prostaglandin release. Prostaglandins are another pathway by which inflammation can occur. By suppressing prostaglandins, we can decrease the pain and inflammation associated with irritated mucous membranes and body parts. Using the three substances in combination provides some natural pain and inflammation control.

- **Omega-3 fatty acids** — Omega-3 fatty acids help decrease inflammation throughout the body. Adding them into the diet of all pets – particularly pets struggling with seasonal environmental allergies – is very beneficial. The best sources of omega 3s are krill oil, salmon oil, tuna oil, anchovy oil and other fish body oils.
- **Coconut oil** — I also recommend coconut oil for allergic pets. Coconut oil contains lauric acid, which helps decrease the production of yeast. Using a fish body oil with coconut oil before inflammation flares up in your pet's body can help moderate or even suppress the inflammatory response.

Sources and References

[dvm360 May 7, 2012](#)
