

Does Your Pet Have Allergies or Is It Something Else?

This valuable nutrient can actually backfire and cause your pet grief. These two general sources can wreak havoc, but pinpointing the exact problem can be tricky. But take heart - There's now a simple, leading-edge solution that removes all the guesswork so you know what you're dealing with.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- In dogs, true food allergies are rare. Most with a “food allergy” actually have a sensitivity to a particular food or ingredient in their diet. A protein is most often the culprit
- It’s important to try to determine the specific food(s) your dog is reacting to using the NutriScan saliva test for 24 foods commonly fed to dogs
- Once the offending food(s) have been identified, a novel diet is introduced to give the dog’s GI tract and immune system a two-to-three month rest
- At the conclusion of the novel diet, other foods are slowly reintroduced one at a time and the dog is closely monitored
- A customized diet and supplement protocol designed by a holistic or integrative veterinarian is necessary to fully resolve existing food sensitivities and GI inflammation, and prevent future problems

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Lots of pets suffer from allergies in today's world, and a major cause of the condition in dogs is food (the other is environment). Recognizing your dog's allergic response is food-related, and identifying the specific food or ingredient, can be a challenge.

What Is a Food Allergy, Exactly?

Simply put, dog food allergies mean your dog's immune system has decided a type of food or ingredient in his diet is attacking his body.

To deal with the perceived threat, his immune system launches a counterattack similar to the type of response it would mount against a real danger, for example, an infectious agent.

Certain substances in a dog's diet are more likely to trigger the immune system than others, and unfortunately, the nutrient your dog needs most — protein — is very often the culprit. Those of us in the holistic community understand this, but also find it peculiar.

Although no research has been published with regard to why carnivores become allergic to their natural evolutionary diet, many holistic practitioners believe foreign contaminants may be the culprit.

Growth hormones, antibiotics and chemical residues could be more likely triggers for an immune system response than the actual protein in food.

But because 99.9% of pet foods use conventionally raised, factory farmed meats and only the leftover, rendered pieces and parts, this will continue to be a problem for almost all susceptible pets.

If your dog has a food allergy, he'll typically have symptoms like itchy skin, skin and ear infections and sometimes, vomiting and diarrhea. Unlike humans, who almost always have gastrointestinal (GI) symptoms with a food allergy, dogs are much more likely to develop skin problems initially.

Often, it isn't until the GI tract has been significantly compromised by the inflammation caused by an allergic response that your dog begins to show symptoms of digestive disturbance.

Food Sensitivity Versus Food Allergy

Most of us use the term "food allergy" to describe any digestive upset that we suspect is the result of something our dog ate. However, true food allergies require a specific type of immune response. Dr. Kathryn Primm writing for veterinary journal dvm360 explains:

"Usually true food allergies, also called Adverse Food Reaction (AFR), are caused by immune response to a main diet ingredient or something that is fed very frequently, not an incidental or occasional ingestion

*It is important to remember that AFR is an actual medical diagnosis and not something you should decide is ongoing and try to manage yourself."*¹

Since true food allergies are actually quite rare, most conventional veterinarians who suspect a pet is dealing with a food intolerance recommend a highly processed "prescription" novel protein diet. However, there's a different approach for this.

Pinpointing Food Intolerances

The first thing to do for dogs (or cats) over the age of one year who are dealing with a possible food sensitivity is the NutriScan food intolerance test. NutriScan was developed by world-renowned veterinarian Dr. Jean Dodds, and tests for 24 of the most common foods dogs eat, including:

- Beef
- Chicken
- Millet
- Soy
- Pork
- Rabbit

- Venison (deer)
- Barley
- Rice
- Sweet potato
- Salmon
- Quinoa
- Chicken eggs
- Wheat
- Potato
- Oatmeal
- Lamb
- Lentils (includes peas)
- Corn
- Turkey
- Peanuts/peanut butter
- Cow's milk
- Duck
- White-colored ocean fish (includes menhaden, pollack, herring and sardines)

According to Dr. Dodds, NutriScan, which is a salivary test, is the most accurate food sensitivity test on the market and removes the guesswork involved in food elimination trials. It's important to note that NutriScan doesn't test for food allergies, but rather food sensitivities and intolerances. As Dr. Dodds explains:

"These are different body immune responses. Food allergy is a more immediate reaction mediated by production of IgE and IgG antibodies.

Food sensitivity and intolerance, by contrast, measures a more delayed body response to offending foods by measuring production of IgA and IgM antibodies primarily to mucosal secretions from the bowel.

*Antibodies to IgA measure the immune response to certain foods in secretions like saliva that have occurred over the last [two] years. Antibodies to IgM measure the body's primary immune response to a recent exposure of certain foods within the last [six] months."*²

Dogs fed the same food day in and day out for a period of months or years often develop a sensitivity to the protein source. If the food is inexpensive and/or highly processed, chances are the meat is loaded with antibiotics and hormones, which can also cause the immune system to overreact.

These dogs also often grow sensitive to allergenic ingredients in the food, typically grains and other carbohydrates.

NutriScan test results can often identify the specific ingredient(s) in your dog's food that are causing a problem, which makes it much easier to customize a novel diet to successfully resolve the issue.

Introducing a Novel Diet

When your dog is having an allergic reaction to some aspect of his diet, his body needs a break from the food he's been eating. This gives the immune system an opportunity to settle down, which usually results in a reduction in symptoms.

After determining your dog's food sensitivities with a NutriScan test, the next step is to introduce a novel diet to start the healing process. Traditional veterinarians sometimes call these diets "hypoallergenic," but there's really no true hypoallergenic diet, because any animal can react to any food at any time.

Introducing a novel diet involves transitioning your dog to a different food containing ingredients his body isn't familiar with. For example, if he's been eating beef- and rice-based food for a few years, we would slowly transition him to, say, rabbit- and potato-based food.

It's very important that both the primary protein and carbohydrate sources be identified in your pet's current food so we can select a different food without those ingredients. When it comes to novel diets, switching just the main protein or carb isn't as effective as switching both.

In addition to switching the protein and carb sources, it's important to also reduce or eliminate grains and filler ingredients that often play a role in allergic reactions and inflammatory conditions.

Pets with food intolerances do best on an ultra-low-starch diet. Because manufacturers don't have to list carbohydrate content on the label, you have to calculate it yourself. It's worth taking the time to do this before choosing a diet so you can avoid further issues down the road.

Moving Beyond the Novel Diet

A dog with food sensitivities should remain on a novel diet for a minimum of two months and preferably three, to allow the body time to clear out the allergenic substances and begin the detoxification process.

During this three-month period it's also ideal to address the dog's dysbiosis (leaky gut syndrome, which results from the allergic inflammatory response in the GI tract) with the appropriate **probiotics** and nutraceuticals necessary to address the root cause of the problem.

Because each case of food intolerance and dysbiosis is unique, consider following a custom formulated protocol created by a **holistic or integrative veterinarian**.

Once a patient has completed two to three months on a novel diet, other foods are slowly reintroduced one at a time, and the dog's response is closely monitored. Some dogs show dramatic improvement on the new diet, and in those cases, don't rush the reintroduction of food that could be problematic.

When the dog is stable and doing well, dog parents need to find at least one and preferably two other protein sources their pet tolerates well so that every three to six months, they can rotate proteins and hopefully avoid further allergic reactions.

In addition, the cleaner the proteins, the less chance your dog will become sensitive to them over time. Clean animal proteins are nontoxic. For example, food animals raised on a natural diet (grass fed, not factory farmed), as well as hormone-free animals, are better food sources for sensitive pets.

During and after a novel diet, consider giving natural supplements to aid detoxification, relieve allergic symptoms and support your pet's immune system. Your holistic veterinarian can help you select the supplements most appropriate for your pet's individual needs.

Sources and References

[dvm360 July 14, 2016](#)

¹ [dvm360, Handout Food Allergy in Dogs, July 14, 2016](#)

² [NutriScan](#)
