

## INFORMATION ON FELINE ATOPIC SKIN SYNDROME

### What is Feline Atopic Skin Syndrome?

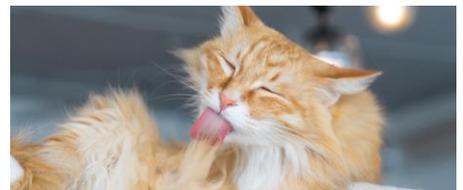
Feline Atopic Skin Syndrome is an **allergic, itchy skin disease**. An allergy occurs when the immune system overreacts to foreign substances called *allergens*. *Allergens* are small foreign proteins that the body immune system tries to remove. The three most common types of allergies in cats are:

- **Flea bite hypersensitivity** (Flea Allergic Dermatitis, FAD) - This is the most common allergy in cats; it is caused by allergy to the flea's saliva, inserted into the cat's skin after a flea bite.
- Food-induced atopy (**'food allergy'**) - Food allergies are caused by an abnormal immune reaction to a food ingredient or food additive. This is the least common allergy in cats; however, it might be important that this is ruled out in order to reach a final diagnosis for your cat (see later).
- Environmental atopy (**'environmental allergy'**) – examples of allergens are pollens, dust and storage mites, and moulds.

### What are the signs of this disease?

The most common manifestation of allergy in cats is **itchy skin**, either localised to one area or all over the cat's body. Other skin lesions include:

- **'Miliary dermatitis'**: numerous very small scabs on the skin under the hair along the trunk which are usually easier to feel when the cat is stroked than to see. Sometimes the scabs can become open sores resulting in a secondary bacterial skin infection (pyoderma).
- **'Eosinophilic Granuloma Complex'** is a collective term used to describe three different skin lesions in cats: eosinophilic plaques, eosinophilic granulomas and indolent ulcers. These lesions are inflamed and itchy and often present on the lips, gums and palate, but they can also develop in other body areas.
- **Hair loss**: this occurs as a consequence of the cat licking/overgrooming due to itchy skin.



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Other less common manifestations of Feline Atopic Skin Syndrome include ear infections, respiratory signs (coughing, sneezing, wheezing), gastro-intestinal signs (vomiting, flatulence, diarrhoea), or nasal or ocular discharge/conjunctivitis.



### Can we find out what my cat is allergic to?

Yes. The three types of Feline Atopic Skin Syndrome can manifest with the same clinical signs; therefore the diagnosis is a **process of elimination**. The first steps will be ruling out flea bite hypersensitivity and food allergy. In some cases, we will recommend excluding other causes of itchy skin first, such as dermatophytosis ("ringworm") or mite infestation.

### How do we rule out Flea Bite Hypersensitivity?

It is the flea saliva that causes the allergic reaction; therefore the most important measure is to prevent flea bites, and we will always recommend very strict flea control. There are many highly effective flea control products, both for treating your cat and for controlling fleas in the environment. We will discuss different options (e.g. spot on, tablet formulation) with you to find the product that best suits your cat.

### How do we rule out a food allergy?

This will be done by feeding a **strict elimination diet** containing ingredients which your cat has not eaten before, followed by a provocative food trial to confirm the food hypersensitivity. We will discuss different options for the elimination diet (wet food, dry food, home cooked, novel protein vs hydrolysed proteins) to find the one that best suits your cat.

### What happens if we have ruled out flea bite hypersensitivity and food allergy, and my cat is still not better?



If your cat's clinical signs persist after very strict flea control and the elimination diet, it means that he/she has Feline Atopic Skin Syndrome triggered by environmental allergens. Once this diagnosis is made, we may offer to perform a **blood or skin test to identify the specific environmental allergens** your cat is allergic to. This can have many

benefits:

- It will enable you to avoid some allergens.
- We will be able to make up a "vaccination" for your cat based on these results to try to desensitize him/her to what he/she is allergic to. This treatment is generally a safe long-term option for feline environmental allergies, but it does not work for every cat.

### How do you treat Feline Atopic Skin Syndrome?

This is a disease that **cannot be cured but can be controlled**. Usually, cats affected by this disease require some form of treatment for life. The treatment required depends on the individual animal and a treatment plan will be specially designed for your pet based on their specific needs. Fleas and food are allergens easy to avoid, while environmental allergens are not.

### What treatment options are available for my pet?

There are different treatment options available. It is important to realise that not every treatment works for every pet. Ultimately, the treatment regime will be tailored to your pet's specific requirements and lifestyle. Generally, we will try to use the least potent drugs possible to control your pet's skin disease. The various treatment options that are available are listed below. A combination of different treatment options may be recommended.

#### Anti-inflammatory/anti-itch treatments

- **Oral corticosteroids ('steroids')** – These drugs are widely used for the treatment of feline atopic skin syndrome, and they are **very effective at controlling itching and scratching**, but they are also one of the most potent drugs available. Steroids are usually very effective, often within a few days you will notice an improvement in your pet's condition. Steroids do have a bad press but can be used safely in cases where other treatments have failed. Cats generally tolerate steroids better than dogs but potential side effects,

particularly at high doses, when injected frequently, when given daily, or over a long period of time, include excessive drinking, excessive urination, excessive hunger, liver damage and the development of diabetes. We will generally reserve them to **manage occasional flare ups**, but in some cases, these are the only effective treatment option. Regular monitoring is required and involves blood and urine tests in cats that need oral steroids on an ongoing basis.

- **Topical steroids** – for example, steroid sprays or creams may be used in conjunction with other treatments.
- **Ciclosporin** - This is another potent drug, which has shown to have the **same efficacy at controlling the allergic itch as the corticosteroids**. However, it can take **up to 4-6 weeks** before the maximum effects are seen, unlike steroids when a benefit can be seen within a few days. This drug can cause cats to vomit or to develop diarrhoea when they first start taking the medication, but this is usually temporary and improves within the first week. To minimise this side effect, we advise the drug is given with food. Before starting this drug, we might recommend blood testing your cat for FIV/FelV and *Toxoplasma gondii*. Cats receiving ciclosporin should not be allowed to eat raw meat, scavenge or hunt. Once the itching is controlled, the frequency at which the drug is administered is slowly reduced, and in some cats, it is possible to reduce the frequency of administration to twice a week.
- **Antihistamines** – These are generally well tolerated drugs, although sometimes sedation can be seen. They are not very good at controlling the itch if given alone, but they can be useful to reduce the amount of other treatment required.
- **Fatty acid supplements** – Studies have shown that fatty acid supplements relieve allergic itch in some cats. They also allow lower doses of steroids to be used and can potentiate the action of antihistamines. It can take 2- 3 months before the benefits are seen.



### Reducing the hypersensitivity reaction to environmental allergens

- **Avoidance of the allergen** – It is **wonderful when this is possible**, but often dust and pollens are very hard to avoid, even in the cleanest of houses. Sometimes it is possible to reduce the exposure which may result in some improvement. Examples include:



allergens (e.g. VetBED GOLD)

- Preventing access to bedrooms for pets allergic to house dust mites; the highest concentration of house dust mites is in the bedroom
  - Check that your vacuum cleaner is fitted with a house dust mite filter
  - Using bedding specifically designed to reduce contact to dust allergens (e.g. VetBED GOLD)
  - Spraying your house with INDOREX (flea spray) will lower house dust mite numbers for a 6-month period
- **Hyposensitisation vaccine (immunotherapy)** – This treatment aims **to reduce the overreacting response to the environmental allergens** to which your cat is allergic to by a series of injections containing these allergens. This treatment is specially ordered for your pet **based on its allergy test results**. This is one of the **safest long-term treatments but may take 12 months for full effect** and does not work in all patients. In some cases, the vaccine may only reduce the amount of additional medication required, but in others

the vaccine can be effective as the only treatment. In most cases, treatment will need to be continued for life. Anaphylaxis (a severe allergic reaction) is a rare side effect of this treatment. Sometimes cats may also become itchy before and after the injections, if this is observed in your pet, please let us know.

### Management of flare factors

- **Flea control** – as flea bites, even if your cat is not allergic to them, can significantly raise the level of itch, it is important for a **strict flea control program** to be in place in almost all cases of feline atopic skin syndrome.
- **Treatment or prevention of secondary infections** – Skin and ear infections can sometimes be seen with feline atopic skin syndrome and require treatment if present. Treating the infection will often give some relief to your pet as infections generally tend to increase the itchiness, making your pet more uncomfortable. To try and prevent recurrence of these infections we will recommend the regular use of antiseptic topical products and ear cleaners if your cat is prone to develop these.
- **Food** – some cats with feline atopic skin syndrome can have a combination of food and environmental allergies. If this is the case for your pet, keeping a strict diet and avoiding the ingredients known to cause a flare up will help to maintain the overall skin condition and itch level under control.

**Feline Atopic Skin Syndrome cannot be cured, but it can usually be controlled well with a minimal risk of problems. We will work with you to get the best outcome for your cat in the long term.**