

INFORMATION ON FOOD ALLERGY

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy is a negative response by the immune system to a protein or carbohydrate in the diet. It is important to understand that food allergies take time to develop and are NOT usually associated with a sudden diet change. Often your dog or cat will have been on their food for an extended period of time before the allergy developed.

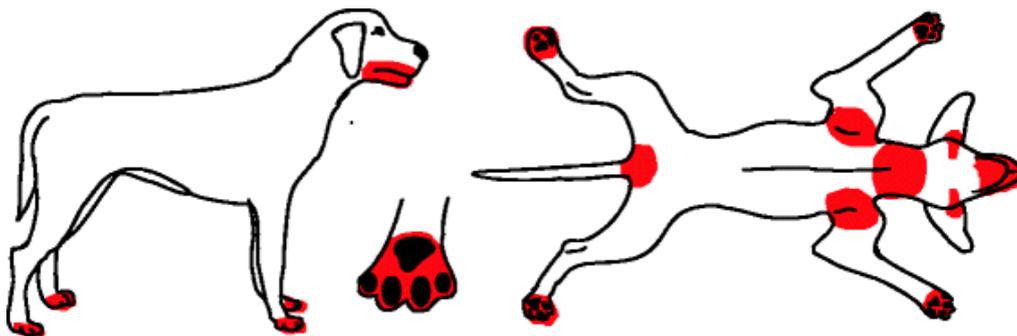
Are food allergies common?

Food allergies are not rare, nearly 20% of all diseases causing itchiness are food allergies.

What are the signs of this disease?

In **dogs** the main clinical signs of food allergy include **itchiness** affecting the face, feet, ears, forelegs, arm pits and the area around the anus. They often get **secondary skin & ear infections** either caused by bacteria or yeast.

Gastrointestinal signs, such as diarrhoea, vomiting, soft stools, flatulence and an increased number of bowel movements can also be present. Less often nail problems, conjunctivitis, sneezing, and hives or anaphylaxis are seen.



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The main clinical sign of food allergy in **cats** is itchiness as well; however this may present in various ways: itchiness of the head, neck and face, little crusts on the back, overgrooming resulting in hair loss or ulcers, sores, and lip lesions.

Food allergies might occur in any breed and gender and at any age, although there is a higher prevalence of this type of allergy in juvenile animals. Forty per cent of dogs with food allergy are younger than one year of age.

A few things that increase our suspicion that we are dealing with a food allergy are:

- Recurrent ear problems
- Very young dogs with skin problems
- Year-round clinical signs or clinical signs that begin in the winter
- Very itchy skin that does not respond well to steroid treatment

How do we test for food allergies?

Although blood tests are commercially available, they cannot be relied on to diagnose a food allergy. To ensure we arrive at the correct diagnosis a **restricted dietary trial** is necessary to accurately identify a food allergy in your pet. This involves feeding an elimination diet for 8-12 weeks. Research has shown that by 8 weeks 90% of the cats and dogs with food allergy are in remission.

During the trial period it is vital that your dog or cat has NOTHING else to eat but the chosen diet and fresh water. Offering treats, human foods, flavoured medications and flavoured toys must be discontinued. If your pet eats something else, the trial has to start all over again. Make sure that all family members and visitors to your home know that your pet is eating a prescription diet.

It would be very helpful if you could keep a diary or journal during the trial to record your pet's appetite, exercise activity, bowel movements, itching, scratching and licking. This will help us to evaluate your pet's progress over time.

If an improvement in your pet's skin condition is observed during the trial, we will recommend a **rechallenge with the old food at the end of the 8-12 weeks**, to confirm the diagnosis. Most patients with a food allergy will have an adverse reaction, such as a flare of red, itchy skin, within 24-48 hours of being exposed to the old diet, but some patients may take up to 2 weeks. Once a diagnosis of a food allergy is confirmed, we will work with you to find the best maintenance diet to feed your dog long term.

If your pet purely has a food allergy then complete recovery should occur at the end of the diet trial; however, allergies to environmental proteins can be commonly seen together with food allergies. If your pet has a combination of food and environmental allergies, you might notice an improvement in your pet's skin condition but not a full resolution. In that case, further tests and treatments to manage the environmental allergy will be discussed with you at the end of the diet trial.

What to feed during a food trial?

The best diet to use during a food trial can only be defined for the individual pet depending on the previous food history. The ideal diet contains a protein to which the animal has not been previously exposed.

- **Home cooked diet with single novel protein and a carbohydrate sources**
This is the 'gold standard' choice but these diets are usually nutritionally inadequate to feed long term or to young growing animals.
They are labour extensive and expensive.
There is also the issue of cross reaction between proteins. Chicken may cross react with duck, turkey and fish, and beef with lamb and cow's milk. To ensure a true 'novel' protein is chosen and to avoid cross reaction between related proteins, exotic meat sources are usually required.
- **Prescription (partially or complete) hydrolysed protein diet**
The proteins in these diets are made into smaller particles (hydrolysed) that reduce their ability to cause an allergy. However, some animals can still react when fed a hydrolysed version of the protein they are allergic to. The Royal Canin anallergenic diet (completely hydrolysed chicken feathers) is the diet containing the smallest particles and it has proven in several studies to be efficient for use in chicken allergic dogs.

- **Prescription novel protein diet**

The same issue of cross reaction as with home cooked novel protein diets needs to be accounted for.

There might be discrepancies between ingredients present in the diet and labelling in commercial pet foods, even in those with novel or limited ingredients. Therefore, we generally recommend using one of the two options above and we don't tend to recommend this option to perform diet trials.

Why don't we recommend the following diets?

- **Commercial hypoallergenic diets**

There are discrepancies of up to 83% between ingredients and labelling in commercial pet foods, even in those with novel or limited ingredients.

- **Raw meat diet**

The argument of feeding these diets is that this approach is healthier and more natural, without additives and that these diets preserve natural enzymes within the gut.

There is no scientific evidence that raw meat diets are beneficial to the allergic pet.

From a public health standpoint it carries a risk to both pets and humans. Pets used for therapeutic reasons or those living with young children, elderly, pregnant or immunocompromised individuals should not be fed raw diets.

Use of systemic therapeutic agents which might immunocompromise the pet will increase the risk of your pet becoming ill or shedding potentially pathogenic bacteria.

- **Grain free diets**

Wheat causes a problem in only 13% of the dogs and 4% of the cats with a diagnosed food allergy. These animals can be fed maize or rice.

- **Gluten free diets**

Gluten only causes breed specific issues not related to skin problems (Irish setters and Border terriers)