

## Help! My Pet Won't Quit Scratching

Learn how you can create an effective allergy awareness program and help relieve itchy pets.

By Wendy S. Myers



At 7:30 a.m., Amanda Wright calls your hospital pleading for help. She and her husband were up all night because their terrier puppy wouldn't stop scratching and licking. When the terrier and family arrive at your clinic, everyone has blood-shot eyes and flared tempers. But you can help clients like the Wrights before symptoms escalate to a 9-1-1 call.

Starting an allergy awareness program, especially before peak summer months, can give clients and pets relief. Atopy is a common disease, affecting 10 percent to 15 percent of dogs. The age of onset varies from 6 months to 12 years, with 70 percent of affected dogs showing clinical signs between 1 and 3 years. Atopy signs are usually seasonal in the beginning, but 80 percent of dogs eventually experience year-round symptoms. Studies suggest that atopy accounts for 15 percent of cases of allergic dermatitis in cats. The onset of atopy in cats is early, 6 months to 2 years of age, although it can range from 6 months to 14 years.

A pet's itchy skin is more than just a minor annoyance. Red, oozing bald patches, rashes and hair loss indicate real discomfort. Because sarcoptic mange or food or inhalant allergy may be the culprit, you need a thorough history and diagnosis to isolate the cause. Follow these steps to help pets stop scratching and start sighing with relief.

**1. Develop a client-education program.** You can use in-clinic displays, articles in your newsletter and web site, vendor brochures and questionnaires to increase allergy awareness. At Mar Vista Animal Medical Center in Los Angeles, Wendy Brooks, DVM, Dipl. ABVP, educates clients with handouts, diagrams and her clinic web site at [www.marvistavet.com](http://www.marvistavet.com).

**2. Make an accurate diagnosis.** Reaching a diagnosis can be a long and frustrating process for you and your clients. Left unsolved, the problem leads clients from one remedy to another—and often one practice to another. In *Muller and Kirk's Small Animal Dermatology* (WB Saunders Co., 2000), the authors recommend a thorough exam and appropriate diagnostic tests the first time a patient is seen before any masking treatment has been initiated.

To collect a thorough history, Brooks asks a series of questions and uses diagrams of where the pet itches. Atopy is associated with irritation in certain body parts of dogs, including the flank, feet, base of the tail and facial areas around the eyes, mouth and ears. In cats, the allergic pattern may be facial, hair loss or a rash of tiny seed-like scabs called miliary dermatitis. Food allergies often cause itchiness on the feet, belly and face.



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To isolate the cause of skin problems, develop a questionnaire or use vendor-supplied history forms such as Heska Corp.'s "Skin Problem History Form for Dogs and Cats." The form asks about when clinical signs are worse, affected areas, symptoms, where the pet lives, other pets in the household, and food and medications. For free history forms in pads of 100 or brochures on dog and cat allergies, call (800) GO-HESKA.

Bioproducts DVM Inc. in Flemington, N.J., offers a brochure, "Doctor, Why Does My Pet Scratch?" The company provides ARREST™ Allergy Management System, an allergy testing and treatment program for canine and equine patients. For brochures or product information, call (800) 654-7251. Its sister company, DMS Laboratories Inc., makes Rapid Vet-D, an in-clinic test to detect the presence of dermatophytes in dogs, cats, rabbits and horses. For product information, call (800) 567-4367.

You can consider such diagnostic tests as skin scrapings, blood tests, skin tests and food allergy trials. When Brooks saw a 12-year-old terrier named Samantha for an itchy face, she took a biopsy and started a food trial with Hill's Pet Nutrition's Z/D diet. Within a month, Samantha's face cleared up. "The hardest part in a trial diet is if there's more than one animal or kids who slip table scraps to the dog," Brooks says.

Once you've confirmed atopic dermatitis, you might consider testing for the presence of allergen-specific IgE. This summer, Heska Corp. will introduce Allercept E-Screen, an in-clinic test that can positively predict the outcome of more extensive serum IgE testing. A pet with a positive E-screen may be a candidate for immunotherapy, says Rebecca Turnbull, DVM, marketing manager at Heska Corp. in Fort Collins, Colo.

**3. Seek a specialist's help.** For complex cases, you may need to refer the case to a board-certified dermatologist. Members of the American College of Veterinary Dermatology are listed in the *AVMA Membership Directory & Resource Manual*.

“Most veterinarians don’t give enough value to their expertise,” says Denise G. Darmanian, vice president of Bioproducts DVM and DMS Laboratories. “They know a lot about allergies. They just don’t take advantage of the value of their expertise and pass up a revenue producer for the practice.”

**4. Consider treatment options.** More veterinarians are considering alternatives to long-term steroid use. Antihistamines, fatty acids, topicals, antibiotics and immunotherapy may provide relief. Heska and Bioproducts DVM supply immunotherapy allergen-specific treatment sets. Customized injections are based on test scores, allergen exposure, seasonal symptoms and where the patient lives. Immunotherapy can reduce symptoms in 75 percent of cases; however, it may take up to 12 months of therapy to see improvement.

“Shots aren’t going to cure allergies by themselves,” says Nicholas A. Gallo, president of Bioproducts DVM and DMS Laboratories. “If you don’t change the environment, you won’t fix the problem.”

#### How to Control House-Dust Mites



If a test confirms a pet is allergic to house-dust mites, you can teach clients to control environmental conditions at home. The dermatology service at Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine in Columbus, Ohio, recommends these preventive steps:

1. Cover mattresses, pillows, dog beds, chairs and sofas with plastic covers.
2. Remove stuffed animals and toys from your pet’s sleeping area to prevent dust accumulation and ensure thorough cleaning.
3. Do not allow your pet under beds or in closets or laundry rooms.
4. Vacuum the house as frequently as possible.
5. Keep your pet outdoors during vacuuming and for at least one hour afterwards.
6. Remove as many carpets and rugs as possible, especially from poorly ventilated rooms such as basements, garages and laundry areas.
7. Wash linen, bedding and blankets each week in hot water of 130 degrees or higher.
8. Use a dehumidifier or air conditioning to keep humidity in your home below 50 percent.
9. Consider products such as a HEPA filter to reduce indoor pollens and dust.

### About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: [www.csvets.com](http://www.csvets.com). E-mail Wendy at: [wmyers@csvets.com](mailto:wmyers@csvets.com).