

Atopic Dermatitis

What is Atopy?

Atopic dermatitis is an allergy that causes recurrent skin disease in your pet. Your pet can develop allergies to a range of things including food, pollen, dust mites, fleas, moulds and even other animals.

What are the signs of atopy?

Most pets become very itchy and start over grooming, scratching or scooting. However, sometimes signs are more subtle and include foot chewing, hair loss or recurrent ear infections. With this self-inflicted damage to the skin, bacteria and yeast overgrow and cause infections making your pet even itchier. Animals tend to develop atopy between 6 months and 4 years of age. It can begin as a seasonal problem, but often progresses until the itchiness continues all year round.

How is atopy detected?

Diagnosing atopy can take a long time because there are so many different conditions that can cause an animal to be itchy. Your vet will need to rule out all other diseases through a series of blood tests and skin samples. To detect specific triggers for your pet's allergy you may be asked to conduct a food trial. This can take up to 2 months to be sure that a food source is not the cause. After this your vet may suggest taking blood samples or performing intra-dermal tests.

Why do I have to do a food trial?

If your pet develops an allergy to a food source it is no reflection on how long he/she has been eating that certain food, whether it's a premium brand, or if it's home-cooked. The only way to discover a food allergy is by conducting an exclusion diet trial. This involves feeding your pet one specific diet for 6-8 weeks. Sometimes your vet might then recommend switching to a different diet for a further 6-8 weeks. When on an exclusion diet your pet cannot eat anything other than the prescribed food. This means no treats, milk, gravy, chews, or table scraps.

How is atopy treated?

It is rare for atopy to be controlled with just one treatment. Control of symptoms tends to require a number of different approaches.

1. **Avoidance** – with food and parasites this can be relatively simple, but with pollens and dust mites this might prove more difficult.
2. **Allergen-specific immunotherapy** – allergy-vaccinations, custom-made to your pet's need, can be ordered. The success rate is somewhere between 50-80%, and when it does work it is a simple treatment with very few side-effects.
3. **Oral medication** – these include anti-histamines and steroids. Some of these medications are expensive but are very effective; others are less expensive but can cause serious side-effects.
4. **Shampoos and creams** – this is labour-intensive, but is a cost-effective and safe treatment.
5. **Essential Fatty Acids** – these supplements calm the skin and increase its natural defences.

Diagnosing atopy and then creating a management plan can be a long and frustrating process. Every animal is different and so are their allergies, therefore please understand that your vet is always trying to get the best result for your pet, with the least possible side-effects, but also at the best price for you.