

Allergic Skin Disease in Pets: Skin Infections

This article is the first of a three part series on allergies and the problems they cause. Today's will focus on airborne allergies and their related skin diseases. It has already been a bad summer for itchy dogs with bad skin rashes. So far, it looks like the Fall we be just as bad. When we see dogs at the clinic for rashes, skin infections, and other dermatology problems, it is usually during the warmer months. This leads most owners to assume that it is the warm weather activities (swimming, walks in the woods, etc.) that are causing these problems. While they are correct about the season, the real reason for these skin problems is actually allergies. Yes, the same thing that causes our runny noses and eyes are what cause our pets to scratch. And the major culprits are the same: pollens, molds, and dust mites.

Unlike people with mostly sweat glands in their skin, pets' skin is full of oil glands called sebaceous glands. These oily pores allow allergen particles to wick into the skin where the body will react to its presence. If the pet is allergic to these particles, the body will respond by making the skin inflamed and stimulating them to scratch. Mild scratching is fine, but if the allergy is severe, the pets can scratch uncontrollably and start to damage the surface of the skin, in some severe cases scratching right through to the muscle underneath.

When dogs get skin infections, the first question clients ask me is "Where did they get it?". 99% of the time, they didn't "catch" it at all; the bacteria and yeast was on the dogs the whole time. The same is true for us at the end of the day: after we shower, our skin is clean, but pathogens start building on our skin as we go about our day. By the end, we are covered. They don't cause an infection because our healthy skin acts as a barrier to protect the deeper tissue. However, if we scratched a certain spot for a long time, the barrier becomes damaged and it will become infected. This is no different with dogs, except they don't know to stop scratching when their skin becomes nasty.

The allergies follow the same patterns as in people. In the late Fall and early Spring, mold counts are high, Late Spring allergens are tree pollens, Summer allergens are mostly grass, and early Fall are weeds (ragweed, nettle, sagebrush...). If pets scratch year round, they are usually allergic to household molds, dust mites, or an ingredient in their food. On the other hand are dogs that scratch at Christmas time. Many of those dogs have pine allergies and can become very itchy when a live Christmas tree is brought into the closed environment of the house.

The good news is that many new treatments have come out in the last few years. Before that, we were stuck using steroids or expensive anti-rejection drugs. These were prone to many side effects like vomiting, urinating in the house, and liver damage. We have had a very unique oral medication for several years that works within 1-3 hours of administration and whose side effects that are basically no different than placebo. Our clinic has also been using a new injectable treatment (monoclonal antibody) with the same rapid onset and a duration of 4-12 weeks per injection. Many pets coming in will also require treatment for skin infections during the initial stages, but these treatments have had amazing results in keeping the scratching at bay. In theory, if clients have their dogs treated with one of these therapies when they first notice scratching, we may never see them for skin infections again. It is exciting to think that skin disease may become one of our most rewarding things to treat after being one of our more

frustrating for so long. If your dog suffers from any of the problems I mentioned, be sure to contact your veterinarian to see if they may be candidates for one of these treatment options.

Stay tuned for part 2 where I will be discussing Ear Infections.