

UNDER THE WEATHER

Atopy in Pets

“Prince is itching non-stop!!” is a refrain every single vet hears every day; day in and day out. One of the most common causes of this kind of severe, chronic itching is atopic dermatitis. If your pet is constantly licking, grooming, scratching or biting himself, he/she may be suffering from atopy, so read on.

The one hallmark of atopy is that it is a persistent, chronic problem, often very frustrating for the pet parent to deal with. What exactly does the term mean? Atopy or atopic dermatitis is an allergic reaction of the skin to allergens. These allergens are usually environmental allergens, like house dust, grass, pollen, fungal (mould) spores, etc. Symptoms are usually seen after three years of age, and manifest as constant licking, biting or chewing certain areas of the body, specially ears and paws. Your pet may also lick other areas such as around the eyes, muzzle, groin, wrist, underarms and ankles. Sometimes sneezing and watery eyes may also accompany the itchy skin. The symptoms may be persistent throughout the year, as in dust mite allergy or seasonal, in case of pollen allergy.

Whenever a vet sees a dog licking or biting his/her paws with red ears, a red light with atopy flashes in the vet's mind. Diagnosis of the problem is challenging, since it is not easy to establish what the skin is reacting to. A complete history helps the vet to make a better diagnosis, so think through what your pet eats, where he/she stays (indoors or outdoors), bedding, food etc. Provide all the details as accurately as you can. The vet will do a complete workup, including a physical exam, blood tests, skin scrapings and decide if serum allergy tests are warranted. Tick and flea control methods will be discussed, since dogs with atopy are very sensitive to tick and flea bites,



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and get skin flare ups immediately.

In very chronic cases you and your vet may decide to do a serologic or skin allergy test to establish the exact cause. It has to be said that the serology tests are very expensive and have to be followed up with allergy injections tailor-made for your pet over six months. Even then, only about 60% pets respond to these injections, so it needs careful consideration.

Intradermal skin tests use minute quantities of allergens injected into the pet's skin to observe the skin reaction which comes as a red bump.

Once the diagnosis of atopy is established, your vet will prescribe anti histamines along with soothing sprays and shampoos. Sometimes steroids are used for severe allergies. The vet will also treat any secondary bacterial, fungal or yeast infection due to the scratching and inflammation. Omega 3 fatty acid supplements will be prescribed, since these help to modify the skin's response to inflammation. (I love O3FAs as we call them, they are good for skin, coat, heart, kidneys and a whole lot of other things). Usually antihistamines are used over a period of a month or so, and if the problem persists after that, immune modulating drugs are prescribed. These have to be given daily for a couple of months, after which they are tapered down to where your pet will take them only once or twice a week. Don't forget to discuss your pet's food, since there are special diets available for this problem.

With all the medicines, shampoos and sprays at our disposal, most cases can be managed reasonably well, however don't expect a cure, because there isn't any. The good news is that many pets manage very well with treatment and have healthy, shiny coats in spite of having atopy.






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