

ATOPY

About the Diagnosis

Atopy is an allergy to substances inhaled from the environment. Substances that can elicit allergic reactions are called antigens.

Atopy can affect dogs and cats, although dogs are more likely to have it than cats. A genetic basis is suspected since it occurs more commonly in certain breeds and lines. Antigens that can be involved in atopy include pollens, molds, dander (shed skin cells), house dust, tobacco smoke, and a variety of other substances.

The primary symptom of atopy is itching, and the problem typically first becomes apparent when a pet is between 6 months and 3 years old. Early symptoms in dogs may be mild and can include foot-licking, face-rubbing, ear problems, and scratching behind the elbows. The problem is often seasonal. As time goes on, the allergy worsens and more areas of the body become involved. Itching that at first occurred only seasonally may become present all year round.

Cats with atopy can show several different types of skin problems. Some show hair loss on the abdomen (belly) and inner thighs or on the back. This hair loss is from overgrooming (licking, chewing) due to itching. Others may scratch around the face and neck. A condition called miliary dermatitis may develop, where small crusts (scabs) can be felt through the hair coat on the surface of the skin. Eosinophilic granuloma complex is another manifestation of allergies in cats; signs include raised, flat, reddened areas (plaques) on the skin or sores on the upper lip.

Diagnosis of atopy may be challenging because many other types of skin problems produce the same degree of scratching, hair loss, and redness of the skin. For your veterinarian to reach the conclusion that atopy is present (i.e., making the diagnosis of atopy), a combination of elements usually needs to be present: the typical history of the onset of itching (often seasonal, since pollens are a common cause of atopy), plus finding a typical pattern of skin lesions over affected areas, and the exclusion of other causes of itching. Your veterinarian will use a thorough physical examination and often will need to perform several tests to rule out problems such as mange mites, ringworm, bacterial infection, or flea allergy, any of which can be identical in initial appearance to atopy. Once the diagnosis of atopy is made, treatment can be undertaken for comfort and relief of itchiness, or further tests can be conducted to determine which substances in the environment are triggering the atopy to remove them or desensitize your pet to them as a form of treatment. These advanced tests include intradermal skin allergy tests and serum (blood) allergy tests.

Living with the Diagnosis

Atopy cannot be cured, so efforts should be directed at managing your pet's symptoms. See the options discussed under Treatment. If initial efforts to control itching are not successful, consider consulting a veterinary dermatologist.

Atopy can be a profoundly frustrating disorder both for the pet and the owner, since relentless chewing and licking can be intensely bothersome to both. With a proper diagnosis and with appropriate treatment, however, the majority of pets with atopy become comfortable.

TREATMENT

Several approaches can be taken for treatment. The best option for the pet's health is to perform tests to determine which allergens are causing the allergy. Then, if possible, contact (usually the problem is via inhalation) with the allergens can be minimized or eliminated. If the allergens cannot be avoided, a series of injections of small amounts of the allergens can be used to desensitize the pet. It is also important to look for other problems that may be contributing to the itching. Many pets with atopy also have other sorts of allergies such as food allergy or flea bite allergy. Also, skin that is inflamed due to scratching and chewing from atopy is then prone to bacterial or yeast infections that can themselves also cause even more itching. Therefore, elimination of as many causes of itching as possible (e.g., fleas, food allergies, secondary skin infections) can control the pet's symptoms, even if the atopy itself is not treated. Do this by eliminating fleas and performing a trial of feeding only a hypoallergenic diet for several weeks. Consult your veterinarian on carrying out these steps and also to have your pet checked for skin infections.

Several medications are used for treating itching. Antihistamines are helpful in some pets. Omega-3 fatty acids can help ease skin inflammation. Corticosteroids (cortisone-like drugs) are often used to inhibit inflammation and itching and are usually very effective. However, corticosteroids are potent drugs that can have serious side effects when used long term, so they should be used at the lowest dose possible and for a limited amount of time. Cyclosporine is a powerful immunosuppressive drug that has been approved for the treatment of itching in dogs. It works as well as corticosteroids in controlling itching and is tolerated well by most dogs, but cyclosporine is expensive. Consult your veterinarian about the various drugs that are available. Often the best response is individualized and some degree of trial and error is needed to find the best combination for a particular pet.

DOs

- Give all medications exactly as instructed.
- If your pet has been tested to determine what substances it is allergic to, try to avoid contact with those substances.
- Eliminate as many other causes of itching and skin inflammation as possible.

DON'Ts

- Don't assume that "cortisone pills" (glucocorticoids) are the only solution to treating an allergy. Although the simplest and most effective in the short term (days), they only mask the allergy and can cause serious health problems long term.
- Don't forget the value of a second opinion. Veterinary dermatologists are experts at skin diseases of dogs and cats, can differentiate atopy from other disorders, are aware of the latest treatments, and so on. Veterinary dermatologists are known as Diplomates of the American College of Veterinary Dermatology and can be recommended by your veterinarian.

When to Call Your Veterinarian

- If symptoms suddenly worsen.
- If signs of ear disease are noticed (head shaking, pawing at ears, pain on touching the ears).

Signs to Watch For

- The following is to be expected as a common response to medication: if your dog receives corticosteroids (cortisone), it is common that he/she will drink more water than usual, be hungrier than usual, and may pant more than usual.
- Sudden increase in itching; this could result from the onset of secondary bacterial or yeast infections.
- Ear problems, such as redness, head shaking, odor; many allergic pets are prone to ear disease.

Routine Follow-Up

- The frequency of recheck examinations depends upon the severity of your pet's symptoms and the treatment methods used. If corticosteroids (cortisone) are part of your pet's treatment program, periodic blood tests may be recommended to look for problems that can result from corticosteroid use.

Additional Information

- Since atopy is an inherited condition, pets affected with this disease should not be used for breeding.