



Dermatitis – Your Itchy Pet and Chronic Skin Disease

You and your pet have been frustrated and miserable – long nights of itching and multiple steroid treatments can drive you both crazy. There is nothing like seeing your pet being bothered and not being able to help them. Many times drugs like prednisone help, but only for a short time and then the pet is right back to scratching and licking. It seems like a revolving wheel that you can't stop. Your dog may be suffering from one of or several conditions. Dermatitis (inflamed skin) can be bacterial, fungal, allergic, neoplastic, immune mediated, or idiopathic (no known cause). Our skin is the largest part of our immune system and when something about that skin and its outer lipid (oily) layer is disturbed, the skin is open to multiple secondary infections. One of the most important things to realize is that itchy pets are often not fixed with just one medication alone and that it often takes time and several tries until the right treatment for your pet is developed. While the initial treatments can take time and money, it is important to remember that you are investing in your pet's comfort and happiness and they will pay you back with love for a lifetime! The following describes for you some of the tests or treatments that the doctor may recommend for your pet:

TESTS

(some of these may need repeated several times or combined with other tests as well)

- 1) Skin scraping – looks for mites such as demodex and sarcoptes that can live deep in the follicles
- 2) Skin cytology – looks for bacteria and yeast, finding the cause of secondary infection
- 3) Fungal Cultures – looking for fungus such as ringworm
- 4) Bacterial Cultures – some bacterial infections don't respond to traditional antibiotics so a culture is performed to see if it is a resistant skin infection
- 5) Blood tests – some internal diseases such as Cushing's and hypothyroidism can lead to chronic skin disease and poor healing
- 6) Skin biopsy – helps to diagnose difficult cases that don't respond to treatment by determining what the skin cells themselves are doing and helps find deep fungus

- 7) Allergy testing – blood or skin testing, blood testing can be performed by our doctor, skin testing done at a dermatologist, these tests determine if and what things in the environment your dog is allergic to, then these results can be used to develop an injection that helps “vaccinate” your pet against these allergens, this is a process that many humans go through (Dr. Sands gets shots for her own cat allergies!)
- 8) Food trials – because of pet food marketing on tv, this is hard for many folks to understand, but food allergies are not limited to “grains” alone, many pets are allergic to multiple proteins (chicken, fish, peanut butter, lamb, etc) and to grains and even yeast (an ingredient in many treats and supplements). There are many “grain free” diets on the market – some good, some not. Many allergic pets do better on a grain free diet, but if they truly have food allergies, using an over the counter food is like throwing a dart at a dartboard – you may or may not pick the right food. The best way to know if your dog has a food allergy is to do an 8 week food trial where they are fed a PRESCRIPTION HYPOALLERGENIC food for 8 full weeks with no other foods, treats, or table scraps entering their mouth. These prescription foods have the lines cleaned before they are made and have ingredients that are protein sizes that the pet does not recognize as foreign and therefore should not react. Once your pet has been on the prescription food for 8 weeks, if they are doing well, the doctor may help you try to transition to an over the counter diet, but they may need prescription food for life if their allergies are severe. IT IS VERY IMPORTANT to realize that just switching the food your pet is on from one over the counter product to another (no matter how expensive) is not enough to know if food allergies are their problem – you may just have picked the wrong food to switch to. Using prescription allergy foods makes the time line much shorter to diagnosing whether it is a food allergy or not. Yes, prescription foods are expensive, but they often reduce or eliminate the need for costly and sometimes dangerous medications for your pet.

TREATMENTS

(many of these treatments are often combined together to give more effective results)

- 1) Topical Relief Products (Shampoos, Mousses, Sprays) – Topical is such an important part of the puzzle – this allows the product to come in direct contact with the skin. Once your pet has a diagnosis of the secondary infection, these products help kill the infection and also help replace the lipid layer on your pets’ skin making it stronger
- 2) Flea and Tick Preventatives – Even though you may have never seen a flea, if your pet is an allergic pet it is likely also to be allergic to fleas. If so, the bite of even one flea can make your pet’s skin flare up. The doctor will make a recommendation of the proper product to use based on your pet’s skin condition – it may be oral or topical but will be monthly on a year round basis. Fleas wreak havoc on allergic patients’ skin!
- 3) Vitamin Supplements – There are many over the counter skin vitamins- your doctor may recommend prescription or over the counter. It is very important to use Omega 3, 6, and 9 together, not just fish oil, in order to reduce inflammation. These also help the pet improve its response to other medications such as anti-histamines.
- 4) Prescription Anti-histamines – These products are safe for your pet to be on lifelong year round in most cases. However, most pets do not experience itch because of histamines. Histamines usually make our pets have runny eyes and noses. Some over the counter

products such as Zyrtec and Benadryl can help with those symptoms, but may not be enough for many pets. Your doctor may prescribe an anti-histamine such as hydroxyzine to reduce symptoms caused by histamines or may not feel that histamines are the culprit in your pet's disease.

- 5) JAK and Interleukin Inhibitors Modulators - in the last decade we have had the blessing of development of two pet specific medications in this class: Apoquel and Cytopoint. These medications block the itch chain reaction in our pets without suppressing the immune system and can be incredibly helpful in making your pet comfortable while being a safe choice long term with minimal to no side effects.
- 6) Antibiotics – If your pet has a secondary bacterial skin infection, the doctor will likely place them on oral or injectable antibiotics in addition to topical therapy. For severe infections, a month of treatment or more is often necessary.
- 7) Antifungals – If your pet has a secondary yeast infection, these may be prescribed. Also, antifungals, such as ketoconazole, can be used to reduce the dose of other more costly medications, especially in larger dogs.
- 8) Steroids – Sometimes steroids like prednisone or triamcinolone are needed to stop the cycle of the itch. While the doctor uses them sparingly and feels that they can be dangerous long term, there are cases when they make good sense to stop the itching long enough for other treatments to start to take effect.
- 9) Prescription Diets/Food Trial – As described in the testing session, it is ESSENTIAL to use the recommended diet and only that diet for 8-12 weeks before deciding if your pet has food allergies or not. Occasionally this is an over the counter product with particular types of proteins, but most times the doctor will recommend a prescription food to start as to have the greatest chance of fast and significant relief for your pet while being sure adequate nutrition is provided. Healing Paws Veterinary Care does NOT recommend Blue Buffalo Products for allergic pets as our doctors have seen many patients with imbalances while on this product line. Also, please be advised that grain free diets of any kind have been proven to cause life threatening heart disease in dogs so should be avoided at all costs.
- 10) Cyclosporine – This drug successfully treats 60% of atopic dermatitis patients. It can be used to reduce amount of steroids needed or kept on a 2-3 time weekly dose to keep dermatitis pets comfortable. Cyclosporine is a drug that is started at one dose and weaned down by the doctor.
- 11) Topical Mite Treatments – Sarcoptes mites can be difficult to find on skin scrapings if they have buried deep within the skin. There are several preventative products that also treat mites so your doctor will likely be prescribing a particular flea/tick preventative for your pet in order to be sure that mites are not hiding in your pet's follicles causing chronic skin disease.
- 12) Allergen Specific Immunotherapy – “allergy vaccines” - If your pet has been blood or skin tested for allergies, they can have their own specific allergy vaccine created. This helps 60-80% of animals improve but can take up to 3-6 months to start to take effect. Therefore the vaccine is often used along with other therapies to help heal your pet.

Hopefully this handout has helped you further understand the steps that will be taken to treat your animal. A staff member can help you with estimates of costs once you and the doctor decide what is right for you and your pet.

Here's to a lifetime of healthy itch-free pets!