

PET FOOD ALLERGIES

Understanding, managing, and treating dietary reactions, food allergies are an increasingly recognized cause of discomfort and illness in companion animals and result from an abnormal immune reaction to specific proteins or other components in a pet's diet.

Common Food Allergens

The most frequent food allergens for both dogs and cats are proteins, particularly those found in beef, chicken, dairy products, eggs, and fish. Some pets may also react to plant-based proteins such as soy or gluten. Despite popular belief, grains cause less allergic reactions in cats and dogs than animal proteins.



Signs and Symptoms

Food allergies often manifest as persistent itching, red or inflamed skin, chronic ear infections, or excessive licking and chewing, especially of the paws and face or through gastrointestinal (GI) symptoms like vomiting, diarrhea, soft stools, and gassiness. Sometimes, both skin and GI symptoms occur together, making diagnosis challenging.



Food Allergies vs. Food Intolerances

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The Elimination Diet: Process and Importance

Diagnosing a food allergy usually requires an elimination diet, where your pet is fed a novel or hydrolyzed protein and carbohydrate source for 8-12 weeks, avoiding all other foods and treats. If symptoms improve, foods are systematically reintroduced to identify the culprit. This method is considered the gold standard for diagnosing food allergies.

Safe Treats and Hypoallergenic Diets

While on an elimination diet, safe treats include only those made from the same novel protein and carbohydrate sources as the prescribed diet. Many commercial brands offer hypoallergenic diets, such as those with hydrolyzed proteins or unique ingredients like venison and potato. Always check labels and consult your veterinarian for approved options.

Reintroducing Foods With Veterinary Guidance

Working with a veterinarian is crucial when reintroducing foods to confirm the diagnosis and ensure your pet's safety. Your vet will guide you through a systematic reintroduction process, carefully monitoring for a return of symptoms. With a thoughtful approach, most pets with food allergies can live comfortable, healthy lives—and enjoy their meals, too.

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Pet allergies are a common condition, affecting the quality of life for countless dogs and cats. Recognizing the signs early is vital for proper diagnosis and management. Allergy symptoms can appear suddenly or develop gradually, and they often present in a variety of forms—sometimes mimicking other medical issues. Here's a breakdown of the most common symptoms associated with allergies in pets:

Skin-Related Symptoms

- Persistent scratching, biting, or licking, especially around the face, paws, underarms, and groin
- Skin may appear red, especially on the belly and between digits
- Moist, inflamed, and sometimes oozing patches or hot-spots
- Patchy or widespread hair loss, typically near the site of itching
- Dandruff, dry, flaky scales, or thickened skin



Ear Infections and Discharge

- Recurring or chronic ear infections are a hallmark of allergies
- Brown or yellow discharge, black waxy build up or foul odor from the ears
- Pets may vigorously shake their heads to alleviate discomfort

Respiratory Issues

- Frequent or excessive sneezing
- A cough that is dry or productive indicates irritation of airway
- Nasal discharge, sometimes accompanied by congestion
- Excessive eye tearing or red, inflamed conjunctiva

Gastrointestinal (GI) Symptoms

- Vomiting, diarrhea or soft stools
- Excessive gas can be a sign of GI irritation
- Frequent bowel movements or increase in volume

Behavioral Signs

- Restlessness or frequent shifting
- Licking/chewing feet or toes (staining, soreness)
- Rubbing on furniture, floor, or people
- Less active or playful

When to Seek Veterinary Care

It can be challenging to distinguish allergies from other health concerns. Owners should seek veterinary care if:

- Symptoms persist beyond a week or worsen over time
- There is evidence of pain, bleeding, open sores, or secondary infections
- Respiratory signs (such as coughing or difficulty breathing) are severe or sudden
- GI symptoms include blood in vomit or stool, or signs of dehydration (lethargy, sunken eyes, dry gums)
- Behavioral changes are drastic, or your pet's quality of life is clearly diminished

Prompt consultation allows for targeted diagnostics, quick relief, and can help prevent chronic complications.