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## ALLERGIES

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Have you ever had your pet wake you up at night scratching nonstop? Itchy pets are one of the most common things I see. Just as people develop allergies to certain foods, pollens, natural fibers among other things, our pets can suffer from allergies as well. Whereas we often show allergies as congestion and difficulty breathing, our pets usually show allergies as itchy skin. Pets will lose hair, paw and rub their face and eyes, scratch and itch ears, feet, armpits, thighs, and groin and often develop skin and ear infections.

By definition, an allergic reaction is the result of an overactive immune response to a substance such as a protein. These proteins can come from many places. A partial list would include saliva from fleas or ticks, secretions from plants, pollens such as ragweed or ryegrass, food proteins like beef, dairy, fish or wheat, house dust, and secretions from bacteria. Often, allergy cases have multiple causes. Also, not every itchy pet has an allergy. Obviously the diagnosis of an itchy pet can be very difficult and time consuming, which usually means expensive. A systematic approach by a clever veterinarian is usually your best bet, but often takes more than one visit.

The veterinarian will need to perform some tests to determine the nature of the cause of the itching. A skin scraping and cytology are usually a good start. From there biopsies, skin or allergy testing and diet trials may be used. The trick is, even though you might find a cause, there may be more than one.

The best treatment for an itchy pet is to remove the cause. If this is fleas, begin a program to clear the environment of fleas. If a food protein is the cause, find a diet that does not have that protein. Sometimes removing the cause can be very difficult, as in the case of an allergy to pollen. We then need to determine which pollens are the cause, and we can attempt to desensitize the pet with allergy injections. Lastly, we can try to mask the allergic reaction using antihistamines and corticosteroids.

Pets can have allergic reactions that don't present as itching, but this is by far the most common sign. If your pet is itchy, seek the counsel of a veterinarian to assist you. It will likely save you money and time in the long run as you try to piece together the puzzle of the cause.