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Using Whole Food Supplements to Treat a Common Skin Disorder in Dogs

Atopic dermatitis (atopy,) commonly referred to as "allergies" by pet owners, is the most common skin disorder diagnosed in dogs in many areas of the US.

Atopic dermatitis is a genetic disease in which the dog becomes sensitized to environmental proteins called allergens. Breeds commonly affected include West Highland White Terriers, fox terriers, Labrador and golden retrievers, dalmations, and cocker spaniels. Allergic dogs develop allergen-specific IgE antibodies to a variety of allergens. These IgE antibodies interact with allergens the next time the pet is exposed to the allergens, resulting in a Type I hypersensitivity reaction in the pet's body.

Allergies usually develop within 1-3 years of a pet being exposed to environmental allergens. Most allergic pets initially have seasonal signs (typically fall and spring,) showing itching of the skin only during the season when the specific allergens to which they are allergic are most prominent. Eventually, most allergic pets will develop signs that last all year long.

The typical allergic pet itches but has normal appearing skin, which helps differentiate atopic dermatitis from other diseases that cause itchiness (mange, flea allergies, bacterial infections, yeast infections, skin cancer) but also cause skin lesions. However, many allergic pets also have secondary bacterial or yeast infections of the skin which will cause further itching plus primary skin lesions. These infections will become chronic if the underlying allergic disorder is not properly diagnosed and treated.

The diagnosis of atopic dermatitis is usually made based upon clinical signs, history, and in conventional medical practices, a positive response to corticosteroids or antihistamines. In difficult cases, dogs can be positively diagnosed with atopic dermatitis with intradermal skin testing.

Conventional treatment of atopic dermatitis relies upon the regular use of corticosteroids and in some cases antihistamines. While short term use of low dose corticosteroid therapy poses no serious health problems, long term use (which is usually necessary to control clinical signs) can be harmful to the pet. Side effects seen with chronic corticosteroid therapy include osteoporosis, adrenal gland dysfunction, liver dysfunction, thinning of the skin, predisposition to secondary infections throughout the body, and weight gain.

Supplementation of the pet's diet with whole food supplements has proven effective as part of the therapy for pets with allergies in many veterinary practices. Whole food supplements, unlike chemical vitamins and minerals, supply a number of nutrients to the pet. These nutrients appear to work in several ways, including stimulation of the pet's own immune system, inhibiting the release of the chemicals such as histamine, serotonin, and substance P, causing itching during the allergy attack, and decreasing the clinical signs seen during the allergy attack (possibly by raising the "itch" threshold.)

My approach to the treatment of atopic dermatitis includes proper diet, regular bathing, and whole food supplements.

Proper Diet

Nutrition begins with what the pet eats. Unfortunately, most pet owners feed processed foods. The most popular brands, promoted via advertising, are often among the worst foods to feed pets. Since pet owners (and many veterinarians) lack an

understanding on how to choose diet, most owners purchase whatever is least expensive, or whatever is sold by seemingly well-intentioned, minimum wage workers at the pet or grocery store.

Many of these diets rely on chemical preservatives including BHT, BHA, and ethoxyquin. Artificial colors and flavors are often added, more for the benefit of the owner rather than the pet. Many diets use low quality "by-product" meals. These meals may contain nonrendered clean parts other than meat, including lungs, spleen, kidneys, brain, livers, blood, bone, stomachs and intestines freed of contents.

There are several more [natural brands of pet foods](#) which are much better than most of the popular brands available at the pet and grocery stores. These brands shun harmful by-products and use less (and in a few cases no) chemical preservatives. Numerous anecdotal reports of pets with skin problems, arthritis, and other disorders "miraculously healing" by switching to these natural diets exist.

While these diets are fine choices for owners who cannot or will not prepare diets for their pets at home, most holistic doctors agree that a homemade diet, made with fresh organic ingredients, is best for the pet. Before relying on supplements to help the pet, it is important for the owner to understand that better results are achieved if the basic diet is as wholesome as possible.

Regular Bathing

The allergens causing itching in dogs are mainly absorbed through the skin (with some inhaled into the body through the respiratory tract.) As a result, frequent decontamination of the skin with bathing and conditioning is critical in helping the pet recover from itching. I recommend using an aloe vera and oatmeal shampoo and conditioner at least 2-3 times per week for most allergic dogs. In severe cases daily bathing is needed until the signs have diminished, at which time the owner can decrease the frequency of the decontamination to 2-3 times per week.

Whole Food Supplements

The best nutrition for people is found in whole foods, and this is also true for our pets. There are several supplements manufactured by Standard Process that have proved useful in treating the pet with atopic dermatitis. Allerplex, AF Betafood, OPC Synergy, Catalyn, and Antronex are the supplements I have found most helpful. The whole food ingredients in these supplements function in a variety of ways, including detoxifying the liver, strengthening the pet's immune system, maintaining cellular health, softening mucus in the respiratory tract, decreasing cellular oxidation, and functioning as natural antihistamines. Adding these supplements to a quality diet provides the pet with a number of nutritious substances that assist the body in dealing with the allergen load encountered during the allergy season. While specific medications may occasionally be needed for short-term relief, the lack of side effects of whole food supplements makes them an important and preferred part of chronic treatment of the pet with atopic dermatitis.

The majority of pets with atopic dermatitis in our country are treated for many years with increasing doses of antihistamines and potentially harmful corticosteroids. While short-term relief is seen, damage occurs to the body from the side effects from conventional therapies. A more natural approach, using a proper diet, regular detoxification with hypoallergenic shampooing, and generous supplementation with the proper whole food supplements is a much more satisfying and less toxic approach to treatment. Dr. Royal Lee believed that there may be a number of important and functional nutrients in whole foods that have yet to be discovered. All of the nutrients present in whole foods are important for health, and the whole food approach minimizes problems that may occur as specific nutrients are removed from food and "purified" into specific vitamin and mineral fragments. Achieving a balance of the nutrients in food allows greater success when treating atopic pets with nutritional therapy.

Each case is different and unique, and the proper nutritional therapy must be tailored to the needs of the pet. Owners are quite willing to adopt a nutritional approach to treating their pets, and are thankful that there is another option. By avoiding

toxicity often seen with conventional drug therapy, we are able to help the pet, satisfy the owner, and take pride in a job well done, resulting in a win-win-win situation for all.

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