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DOES YOUR PET ITCH, SCRATCH, RUB, CHEW, LICK OR SCOOT?

There are many causes of pruritus (itchy skin) in cats and dogs. Often there may be several pruritic diseases occurring at the same time and the clinical signs and skin changes may be complicated by secondary skin infections. The skin may be red, inflamed, flaky or have dandruff, have an odour, and the pet may be uncomfortable and chew, bite, lick, or scratch often. It is important that we try to identify, manage, and try to treat these itchy skin diseases as well as treating any secondary skin infections. Pruritus is a very common skin disorder and may be a frustrating condition to treat or simply manage for both the pets and their owners.

When dealing with allergic dermatitis and pruritus it is important to consider that each cat or dog has an individual "allergic threshold" or tolerance to pruritus. Many pets tolerate a significant allergic load showing only very minimal itching until there occurs a small increase in the allergic load which may push a pet over their threshold and cause much more severe pruritus. For example, changes in the general condition of the skin, changes in the environment, skin infection, and external parasites such as fleas or mites.

A complete history of your pet's health, diet, environment, and parasite prevention (eg. flea control) is very important in assessing and understanding the possible causes for their itchy skin. There are then several diagnostic tests that may need to be carried out to investigate and then safely treat or manage your pets pruritus. These steps include: skin scrapings, skin cytology, a skin biopsy, hormone blood testing, intradermal skin testing, and elimination diets. Part of the diagnostic investigation and treatment may also require trialing an effective and proven flea or mite product for several weeks. In the case of atopy, the diagnosis is essentially reached after all other possible causes of pruritic skin disease have been eliminated and if appropriate, an allergen test can then be performed.

As with many chronic skin disease problems, it may often take weeks to months of treatment and allergen avoidance to successfully cure or manage the pruritus. Sometimes it may be necessary to first resolve any secondary skin infections in order to investigate and control any other causes for the pruritus. Cats can also be secretive lickers so hair loss even without skin inflammation may be the only sign of itchy skin. Patience is essential and remember your pet will feel so much better and happier once the itching and scratching is all over.

Causes for pruritic skin disease include:

1. Parasites - COMMON
2. Allergies - COMMON
3. Bacterial and yeast skin infections (often occur in combination with allergic skin disease) - COMMON
4. Miscellaneous (primary and secondary seborrhea (dandruff), calcinosis cutis, immune-mediated skin disease, skin cancers, psychogenic or behavioural diseases, hormonal skin diseases)- MUCH RARER

PARASITES

Eg. fleas, ear mites, scabies, Demodex mites, lice, Cheyletiella.

The time of the year that your pet is itchy, exposure to other pets, and the areas of the body affected by this itching may give a very good indication of if and what type of parasite may be causing the pruritus. Even if we cannot see any parasites on the skin or via skin tests, we may still be very suspicious of parasites being present and a treatment trial of an appropriate parasiticide may be necessary to diagnose and treat the problem. It is also important to consider that we must control parasites not only on our pets but also in the environment and bedding, and sometimes on other in-contact pets as well.

ALLERGIES

Eg. flea bite hypersensitivity, atopy, contact allergies, food allergies, drug eruptions and hypersensitivity.

Flea bite hypersensitivity is a very common cause of allergic and itchy skin disease. Our pets are most often affected in the warmer months of spring and summer. The distribution of flea allergic dermatitis is usually around the tail, tail base, groin, thighs, and sometimes especially in cats around the head and neck. Some cats and dogs are extremely sensitive to the flea's saliva and one bite is enough to trigger a severe reaction for many days. For these very sensitive pets, all year round flea treatment may be necessary.

Atopy is the predisposition to become allergic to normally innocuous substances such as pollens (grasses, weeds, trees), moulds, house dust mites, and other environmental allergens. These allergens may be inhaled or come into contact with the skin so we can appreciate how hard it would be to avoid all such potential allergens. In dogs there may be an inherited predisposition to developing atopy and it is usually seen in younger dogs between 6 months and 3 years of age. It may be seasonal in nature (ie. evident in the warmer months) and symptoms may progressively worsen with time and allergen exposure. There is usually a temporary response to glucocorticoids ("steroids") and the ears, face, feet, and armpits are usually affected. Lesions vary (often depending on how much your pet itches), secondary bacterial and yeast infections are common, and sometimes ear infections and conjunctivitis may be associated. Unfortunately it is rare that we can ever cure atopy and in many patients some form of therapy may be necessary for life. The most accurate way of identifying the offending allergens is intradermal skin testing which is performed by skin specialists.

Contact allergies may cause severe redness and pruritus of the feet, muzzle, armpits, and belly (ie. in areas which have come into direct contact with the allergen). A number of plants have been associated with contact allergies eg. wandering jew, and some plastics and fabrics may also cause irritated skin.

Food allergies may cause identical skin problems as atopy however affected pets are usually itchy all year as they are exposed to the same diet daily. Pets with a food hypersensitivity do not always respond well to glucocorticoids. Sometimes vomiting, diarrhoea, flatulence, and frequent bowel movements may also be a feature of food allergies. Pets may become allergic to a variety of proteins found in certain meat, wheat, and dairy products. A food elimination diet is the definitive test for food allergies and can be tailored to the individual pet. The diet must be restricted to one protein and one carbohydrate to which the pet has had limited or no previous exposure to. It may take up to 13 weeks on this diet for maximum improvement however noticeable improvement should be seen by the 4th week. Examples of protein sources include: kangaroo, fish, rabbit, and venison. Examples of carbohydrate sources include: potato, sweet potato, and pumpkin. A vitamin and mineral supplement plus vegetable oil or essential fatty acids may also be required if you are creating a home-cooked diet. Remember not to add pasta or rice as these are often in commercial foods. Changing from one brand of commercial food to another may not be effective as most diets are formulated by similar and multiple protein and carbohydrate sources. Be careful giving treats, chewable toys, or even some chewable medications. We must not allow the pet to hunt or scavenge other foods. All family members and even friends or neighbours who give our pets the occasional treat or snack must all be involved and aware of the stringent elimination diet. The final assessment of a food allergy is then to expose or challenge our pet to the suspect food item and see if signs of pruritus develop.

For the majority of our pets there is no cure for allergies but with appropriate care and therapy we can minimise the severity and duration of clinical signs.

BACTERIAL AND YEAST SKIN INFECTIONS

Bacteria and yeast are a normal component of our pet's skin and ears. When natural skin defences are damaged, compromised, or altered then bacterial and yeast skin infections may develop. Owners may not even be aware of low grade allergies until a secondary skin infection develops. These infections need to be treated in conjunction with the treatment of predisposing factors or disease. It may take many weeks of medications (tablets, rinses, lotions) to cure skin infections especially if they are of a chronic nature.

TREATMENT OPTIONS:

1. Identification and Avoidance- this may include vigilant flea control, special diets, intradermal skin tests, and limiting access to certain plants etc. Immunotherapy formulated individually for each patient based on intradermal skin test results is a safe treatment option for some types of allergies. The success rate claimed is between 50-70% and it is very safe. However, initially it is a more expensive option and has a slower onset of improvement (2-12 months).
2. Anti-inflammatories- sometimes corticosteroids to relieve the itch-scratch cycle are required. These drugs, when used at high doses over a longer period of time can have adverse side effects such as weight gain, fatty liver, diabetes, pancreatitis, muscle wastage, and recurrent skin and urinary tract infections. For these reasons we try to restrict cortisone treatment to lower doses over a short term if at all possible. Cortisone may be administered as a lotion or ointment, tablets, or in injectable form. Topical lotions or ointments and tablets are essentially much safer than long-acting cortisone injections.
3. Antihistamines- important in reducing histamine release from certain cells which causes intense pruritus. On their own, antihistamines such as Polaramine are probably not sufficient to control severe allergies however they may work well with other medications and reduce the dose of cortisone if cortisone is required. There is a lag phase of 3-5 days before your pet may show improvement and you should continue treatment for 2-3 weeks to assess if there has been any response to the antihistamine.
4. Topical shampoos- particularly those containing oatmeal or aloe vera (eg. Episoothe and Aloveen) help to soothe dry, irritated skin and they also typically moisturise the skin. They are very safe but you may need to use these shampoos every 1-2 weeks to relieve the pruritus. Some shampoos also combine the benefits of antibacterial or antifungal agents. Other naturopathic topical agents include: oatmeal rinse (1/2-1 cup oatmeal squeezed into water), evening primrose oil cream, peppermint rinse, German chamomile cream, and witchhazel have been used but are not always appropriate or effective depending on how severe the condition is.
5. Essential fatty acids- such as omega 3 and 6 fatty acids may be used in your dog's diet to enhance natural anti-inflammatory and antipruritic properties of the skin. They also to add lustre to your dog's coat (not normally used in cats). Supplements such as Efa-Z, Omega-3, and Megaderm are readily available and safe and easy to use. Some oils such as cold pressed fish oil, flax oil, safflower oil, and sunflower oil may also be used however it is best to discuss these oils with the vet before starting them.
6. Antimicrobials, antibiotics, and antifungals- used to treat secondary skin infections which are also often associated with itchiness.
7. Cyclosporin- one of the newer drug therapies that is being used to treat Atopic dermatitis. Cyclosporin is described as a selective immunomodulator and as such is different and safer compared with corticosteroids. It is a very effective treatment although at present, it is one of the more expensive medications available.