

Signs Your Pet Is Dealing with Seasonal Allergies

by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

If you suffer from seasonal allergies, chances are you do lots of sniffing and sneezing, your eyes are itchy and watery, you may have some coughing and perhaps some shortness of breath or difficulty breathing. These are all very typical human symptoms of allergies. But interestingly, if your dog or cat has a seasonal allergic response, it will most often manifest as a condition called allergic dermatitis, which is irritation or inflammation of the skin.

A dog or cat with allergies is usually very itchy. She'll scratch at herself and may show signs of irritability. She might bite or chew at a specific area of her body, or she may be itchy from her nose to her tail. You may catch her rubbing her body against your furniture or the carpet to help relieve her miserable itch.

As the itch-scratch cycle progresses, the skin becomes inflamed and tender, setting the stage for secondary infections. There might be areas of hair loss, or open or crusty sores. She might also develop hot spots, which are areas of inflamed, infected skin resulting from an overgrowth of normal skin bacteria.

Pets with seasonal allergies typically have problems with their ears and feet. The ear canals become itchy and inflamed, and they often become infected with yeast or bacteria. Symptoms of an ear infection include scratching at the ears, head shaking, hair loss around the ears, and a bad smell or discharge coming from the ears.

Because dogs and cats sweat from the pads of their feet, when they go outside, allergens cling to their paws. Those allergens get tracked back inside and all around your home, especially in areas where your pet hangs out, and are a major source of itchiness. Allergic pets often lick or chew at their paws and toes. The excessive licking and chewing can spark a secondary yeast infection, so if your pet's feet start smelling musty, or like cheese popcorn or corn chips, chances are she's developed a yeast infection.

Although it's not common, some pets, especially cats, can develop symptoms similar to those of an allergic human, such as a runny nose, watery eyes, sneezing, and coughing.

It's important to note there are only two types of allergies: food and environmental. Food allergies create year-round symptoms in pets, whereas seasonal environmental allergy

symptoms flare intermittently depending on when triggers bloom, blossom and grow. Sensitivities to dust mites or fleas (flea allergy dermatitis) are environmental triggers that can be year-round, depending on your pet's exposure.

7 Natural Treatments for Pets with Allergies

The following are common sense, all natural steps you can take to help ease your pet's discomfort when she's dealing with seasonal allergies.

- 1. Address the diet.** The first thing I do with a dog or cat with allergies is review their diet and check for leaky gut syndrome. Often dysbiosis, which is also called leaky gut, is the reason seasonal allergies get progressively worse from one year to the next.

Your pet's gastrointestinal (GI) tract has the very important job of deciding what nutrients to allow into the bloodstream, and which to keep out. The job of the GI tract is to allow nutrients in while keeping allergens out. When the gut starts to "leak," it means it's allowing allergens into the bloodstream.

Often medications, especially antibiotics and steroids, cause leaky gut syndrome. Any pet on routine drug therapy should be assessed for a leaky gut. There's a canine dysbiosis test from Texas A&M GI lab you can use to check for this condition if you're unsure if your pet is affected.

Another trigger for leaky gut is a processed diet containing genetically modified ingredients. Pets with allergies should be transitioned to an anti-inflammatory diet. Diets that create or worsen inflammation are high in carbohydrates (above 15 percent). Your allergic pet's diet should be very low in grain content. It should also contain no soy, corn, rice, wheat, organic whole wheat, tapioca, peas, lentils, chickpeas or potatoes.

By eliminating extra sugar and carbohydrates in the diet, you'll also limit the food supply for yeast, which can be very beneficial for itchy dogs. It's also important to offer your pet clean, pure drinking water that doesn't contain fluoride, fluorine, heavy metals or other contaminants.

- 2. Supplement essential fatty acids and lauric acid.** The second thing I recommend is boosting the omega-3 fatty acids in your pet's diet. The best sources of these fatty acids come from the ocean, including krill, salmon, tuna, anchovy and sardine oil, and other sources of fish body oils. Make sure the omega-3s you offer your pet are tested for purity, are sustainably sourced, and ideally come from a capsule or an airless pump to avoid the rancidity issues we see with pour-on oils.

I also recommend coconut oil for allergic pets because it contains lauric acid, which has natural anti-fungal properties that can help suppress the production of yeast in your pet's body. Omega-3 oils combined with coconut oil can moderate or even suppress the inflammatory response in allergic pets.

- 3. Refuse all unnecessary vaccines, pest preventives and veterinary drugs.** Because allergies are an exaggerated immune system response, it's important to avoid unnecessary vaccines and veterinary drugs, including chemical pest preventives. Vaccines are designed to stimulate the immune system, which is the last thing an allergic animal needs.

Instead, I recommend talking to your integrative veterinarian about titer tests to measure your pet's immunity as an alternative to automatically vaccinating. If your pet is taking medication regularly or has taken a long-term course of medication in the past, talk to your veterinarian about instituting an intermittent detoxification program to help the body eliminate harmful by-products and drug residues.

- 4. Give frequent baths, and daily foot soaks and eye rinses.** The fourth thing you can do is help rid your pet's body of allergens. Asthma and allergy specialists recommend that people with seasonal allergies shower twice a day to rinse the allergens off the body. But for some reason, it isn't suggested for itchy veterinary patients. It can be kind of a pain to do, but it's well worth it.

Pets who go outside regularly collect millions of allergens. You can't see them, but those allergens are riding around on your pet's fur. When she comes inside, the allergens come in with her. A common-sense approach is to rinse them off, which can provide immediate relief for irritated, inflamed skin. "Irrigation therapy" (rinsing pets off) is a great way to reduce allergen build up.

When it's time to actually bathe pets, I recommend using only grain-free and pH-balanced shampoos. Because oatmeal is a carbohydrate and carbs feed yeast, I don't recommend oatmeal shampoos. Follow up with a lemon juice or vinegar rinse to help manage yeast infections.

Foot soaks, especially if the only symptom of your pet's seasonal allergies is itchy feet, are a great way to reduce the amount of allergens your pet tracks into the house and spreads all over her indoor environment. If your pet is prone to licking and chewing her feet, this is a great way to reduce the potential for infected nail beds, interdigital cysts and inflamed, swollen pads.

The common-sense theory behind this is: If we know outdoor allergens are the reason a pet is obsessively licking and chewing his itchy feet, manually removing those allergens provides tremendous, drug-free relief.

Daily eye rinses can also be very effective for pets who are pawing at their eyes. It's very important that you not use human medicated eye drops. There's a great all-natural over-the-counter eye drop that's made by Halo Pets that can reduce eye irritation and inflammation. Colloidal silver is also a great way to safely disinfect your pet's face and delicate areas around the eyes.

- 5. Minimize indoor allergens.** The fifth thing you can do to help your allergic pet is reduce allergens and toxins around your home and in your dog's or cat's immediate environment. Vacuum all carpets, rugs and upholstery, clean hard floors, and wash pet and human bedding a minimum of once a week.

Keep the areas of your home where your pet spends most of her time as allergen-free as possible. Use nontoxic cleaning agents instead of traditional household cleaners. Make sure you're not adding anything toxic in your home environment that could create multiple chemical hypersensitivities in your pet.

During allergy season, keep windows closed as much as possible, and change the filters on your heating or air circulation unit often. Invest in an air purifier to remove allergens inside the house. Also consider covering your pet's bed with a dust mite cover that can be frequently washed to help reduce allergen contamination that she may be bringing in from outside.

I also recommend eliminating plug ins, scented candles, room sprays and pet odor sprays, which contain toxic ingredients for everyone in the house.

- 6. Give natural antihistamines.** Number six is to offer natural antihistamine support to your pet. There are supplements I routinely prescribe to pets with seasonal allergic issues starting with quercetin, which is a bioflavonoid with anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and antihistamine properties. I call it “nature's Benadryl,” because it's very effective at suppressing histamine release.

Bromelain and papain are proteolytic enzymes that increase absorption of quercetin, making it more effective. I like to combine bromelain and papain with vitamin C and quercetin, because they have a great synergistic effect. They also suppress prostaglandin release, which in turn decreases the pain and inflammation of irritated mucus membranes and other areas of the body.

Herbs such as stinging nettle, butterbur, sorrel, verbena, elderflower and cat's claw have a documented history of helping animals combat seasonal allergic responses. Long ago these herbs were used only in humans, but in the last hundred years, veterinary herbalists have successfully used them with dogs and cats as well.

Plant sterols and sterolins, which are anti-inflammatory agents, have also been used successfully to modulate the immune system toward a more balanced response in allergic patients.

Locally produced honey contains a small amount of pollen from the local area that can help desensitize the body to local allergens over time. Usually the best place to find local honey is at a farmer's market or neighborhood health food store. Check with your veterinarian about the right dose for your dog or cat.

- 7. Consider a desensitization protocol.** Finally, if you've tried the above suggestions with limited success, I recommend helping your pet's immune system quiet down through desensitization. This can be achieved through a technique called Nambudripad's Allergy Elimination Techniques (NAET) performed by practitioners trained to treat dogs and cats, or through sublingual immunotherapy.

Sublingual immunotherapy (SLIT) is a relatively new variation on allergy injections to treat atopic dermatitis (skin allergies) in dogs, cats, and horses. SLIT is common in Europe and is used to treat respiratory and skin allergies in people. Sublingual immunotherapy is given orally, which is much easier on both you and your pet than injections. It's delivered with a metered pump dispenser that sprays a few drops of allergen solution onto the tissues under and around the tongue.

I've had good success using a sublingual product called regionally-specific immunotherapy, or RESPIT®. I like it because it doesn't rely on testing to determine what your dog or cat is allergic to. It uses a mixture of the most significant regional allergens instead.

If your pet has been diagnosed with atopic dermatitis, I would recommend that you talk to your veterinarian about sublingual immunotherapy, which can potentially over time resolve the underlying allergy instead of just addressing the symptoms.

If you decide to use sublingual immunotherapy, it's important to know that most pets require an "immediate relief" protocol (including therapeutic bathing, herbs and nutraceuticals that reduce inflammation), in addition to beginning a desensitization protocol of any kind.

Desensitizing pets is one of the best long-term solutions for managing allergies, and sublingual immunotherapy is a needle-free option.