



Allergies and how to help your dog avoid allergens

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Allergies and how to help your dog avoid allergens

Most itchy dogs need some medical help and this is often time consuming, expensive and sometimes has side effects. If the itch is caused by a parasite that should be curable. As a general rule, itchy skins do not resolve without treatment; so, if your dog is scratching an early visit to your vet is advisable. Unfortunately, your vet will not be able to cure an allergy so dogs with allergy usually need lifelong care. Avoiding the trigger for the itch is much the best solution, sometimes this can be achieved and is all that is needed; in some other dogs it will aid their medical treatment so that you may need less of it - and that may mean lower costs and fewer side effects.

What is an allergen?

Allergens are substances that trigger an allergic reaction – an abnormally strong immune response that causes damage to the body.

Common allergens for dogs are parts of house dust mites, pollen, food proteins and flea saliva. Mould spores, fabrics and the dander of other species (feathers, wool, cats) are less common allergens.

Which dogs will benefit from allergen avoidance?

Allergen avoidance is the best and most effective intervention for animals with flea allergy, adverse reactions to food (food allergy) and contact allergy. Allergen avoidance is sometimes possible and may be useful for dogs with atopic dermatitis as well as allergic conjunctivitis and rhinitis.

Atopic animals may have a component of adverse reaction to food allergens, if so avoiding these foods will be beneficial, and should reduce the anti-inflammatory medication load required to control the concurrent atopic dermatitis.

What can generally help to reduce the allergen burden for dogs with atopy?

Animals reacting to indoor allergens may need no other treatment if they are housed outside, eg in a kennel or cattery.

Regular washing removes allergens from the skin and this can be very helpful in controlling skins of canine atopic dermatitis.

Air conditioning and filtration systems are the most effective methods of allergen removal from the home. In damp areas dehumidifiers can help to reduce mite reproduction and mould growth. Regular vacuuming and dusting, in conjunction with periodic steam cleaning of carpets will also lower allergen levels.

How can I reduce exposure to house dust mites?

Mattresses, fabric-upholstered furniture and carpet are the major sources of house dust mites; indoor heating systems may assist aerolization of mites and debris. Elimination of house dust mites is difficult but the following may help:

- Reduce humidity.
- Removing carpets may help but dust is then in direct contact with the dog's skin rather than deep within the pile.
- Increased frequency of cleaning has not demonstrated a lower level of mite activity.
- Wash bedding in hot water (>70°C/158°F); clean soft furnishings, bedding and living quarters frequently with damp cloth; place bean bags in the deep freeze to kill and denature the house dust mites (HDMs); thorough aeration and drying in sunlight will help to kill HDMs. Note house dust mite feces and dead mites are allergenic.
- Ideally use high efficiency particle air (HEPA) vacuum cleaners or at least ones with dust filters and/or fresh vacuum bags; keep pets out of rooms for 2-3 hours after vacuuming or cleaning; air rooms thoroughly.
- Pets should be prevented from sleeping on furniture or beds; ideally access to upstairs/bedrooms should be prevented entirely.
- Consider removing 'dust-collectors' such as stuffed toys, upholstered furniture, books, newspapers and magazines.
- Frequent grooming.
- Provide plastic baskets and synthetic bedding (eg Vetbed®) that can be washed frequently at high temperatures, in uncarpeted, wood, vinyl or tile-floored rooms.
- Sodium borate powder applied to carpet.
- Use hypoallergenic waterproof casings for mattresses and pillows. Place a zippered plastic or HDM proof cover over the pet's bed.

The above activities may reduce mite numbers but residual allergen concentration may still cause clinical disease. Nevertheless, lowering the allergen burden is fundamental to long-term management.

How can I reduce exposure to storage mites?

The significance of storage mites is uncertain. They may be associated with atopic dermatitis by cross reacting with house dust mites.

- Check food bags for external damage before purchase.
- Try not to buy more than a 30 day supply of food at a time.
- High quality food will have less particulate debris and may also come in re-sealable bags.
- Store complete dry food in plastic containers with a tight-fitting lid, not in open bags or boxes. Do not store food in garages, sheds nor cellars.
- Do not feed dusty remnants of food at the bottom of the container.
- Wash containers in hot (60°C/140°F) water and then dry completely before refilling.
- Wipe the pet's mouth and lips after feeding with a damp sponge to remove food particles from the skin.

How can I reduce exposure to pollens?

Plants that are wind-pollinated produce millions of pollen grains per floret. Conditions of high wind and low humidity promote dissemination of pollen.

Heavy prolonged rainfall 'cleans the air' but light rainfall at a time when airborne pollen numbers are high can decrease convection and airspeed thus prolonging local exposure.

- Confine the pet inside especially whilst mowing the lawn.
- Restrict outdoor activities during times of high pollen concentrations especially during dawn and dusk when high pollen counts are forecasted.
- Removal of some trees with heavy pollens may assist, eg pines, wattles.
- Rinse allergen from the skin surface using flowing water after exposure, eg after exercising in fields.
- Avoid long grass and grass cuttings.
- Keep weeds out of garden and avoid having shrubs, etc near open windows/doors.

How can I reduce exposure to molds?

Mold allergens are more likely when indoor humidity levels are over 60% so reducing condensation and removing fabrics from that environment will reduce mould exposure.

- Avoid access to high humidity areas such as bathroom, utility room, basement, conservatory, greenhouse, barn, etc.
- Avoid large numbers of houseplants.
- Avoid exposure to leaf litter, mulches, soil, rotting logs, grain bins/silos, hay/silage and compost bins.
- Avoid dusty foods.

How can I reduce exposure to epithelials (sheep wool, duck/goose/chicken feathers)?

Limit exposure to bedding/carpets/soft furnishings that may contain these animal allergens in households and vehicles.

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