



FOOD ALLERGY AND INTOLERANCE IN CATS AND DOGS

Food allergies and intolerances are two different conditions which often have similar symptoms. They are both examples of adverse food reactions, however food allergies involve the animal's immune system while food intolerances do not.

ADVERSE FOOD REACTION

FOOD ALLERGY OR HYPERSENSITIVITY

A particular component of food (usually a protein) triggers the susceptible animal's immune system to react, for example cells may release histamine which causes itching.



FOOD OR DIETARY INTOLERANCE

Something in the food doesn't agree with the animal's body but does not trigger the immune system to react, for example a dog may not be able to digest cow's milk well.



COMMON SIGNS OF ADVERSE FOOD REACTIONS

Itchy skin (also known as pruritus) and digestive upsets are the most common symptoms of an adverse food reaction, although ear problems can also occur in some dogs. It is important to remember that these are all symptoms that can also develop from non-food allergies as well.

ITCHY SKIN IS OFTEN NOT CAUSED BY FOOD

It is common for people to assume that itchy skin is caused by a food allergy but **true food allergies in cats and dogs are relatively rare**; they are responsible for only 1% of all skin diseases in dogs² and are only the third most common occurring skin allergy after flea-allergy and atopy (sensitivity to an environmental trigger like grass, dust or pollen)³.

DIAGNOSIS OF ADVERSE FOOD REACTIONS

Allergies and intolerances are poorly understood in companion animals and don't necessarily behave the same as similar conditions in humans. Gaining an accurate diagnosis may take time and can be frustrating for pet owners, though ultimately rewarding.

1. Roudebush P, Guilford WG, Shanley KJ: Adverse reactions to food, in Hand MS, Thatcher CD, Remillard RL, Roudebush P (Eds): *Small Animal Clinical Nutrition*, Ed 4. Topeka, KS, Mark Morris Institute, 2000, pp 431-453.
2. Olivry T & Mueller R (2017) Critically appraised topic on adverse food reactions of companion animals (3): prevalence of cutaneous adverse food reactions in dogs and cats, *BMC Veterinary Research*, 2017 13:51.
3. Verlinden A, Hesta M, et al. Food Allergy in Dogs and Cats: A Review. *Crit Rev Food Sci Nutr* 2006 ; 46:259-273.

FURTHER ADVICE AND INFORMATION ON PET HEALTH CAN BE FOUND AT WWW.UKPETFOOD.ORG



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ELIMINATION DIETS

With instructions from a veterinary professional, an elimination diet trial should be conducted, to remove the suspected food allergen from the diet (including any treats and extras) for an extended period of time. Keeping a food diary and a record of changes to clinical signs could be part of the diagnosis process. 'Challenging' your pet with a food allergen to see if a reaction occurs is the final step in an elimination diet trial.

The aim of these trials is to identify the food allergen. This is hugely beneficial as you can then avoid feeding it to your pet, which means he/she will be able to live a comfortable and healthy life.

TYPES OF ELIMINATION DIETS

There are a few options for elimination diets and your vet can help you decide on the most appropriate option:

- Hydrolysed diets are composed of very small protein molecules. The aim is for these small molecules not to be recognised by the immune system, reducing the risk of an allergic reaction.
- Novel protein diets include a single protein source which the pet has never eaten before and therefore hasn't developed an allergy to. Examples of novel proteins include duck, salmon, venison and whitefish, or even more exotic ingredients such as kangaroo.
- Homemade diets are another option to control the ingredients in your pet's food. Preparing these can be time consuming and difficult to balance, meaning they frequently provide inadequate long-term nutrition. For this reason, homemade diets are often used as a temporary measure until the right pet food product is identified.

ADVICE IS ON HAND

Food allergies and intolerances can be serious medical conditions, affecting the health and well-being of your pet, therefore it is always advisable to seek veterinary attention if you suspect these conditions. It is also important to read your pet's food labels carefully. To understand your pet food labels please refer to our guide; **UK Pet Food Labelling Factsheet**.

MOST LIKELY PROTEIN SOURCES CAUSING ADVERSE FOOD REACTIONS*

IN CATS

- Beef
- Fish
- Chicken

IN DOGS

- Beef
- Milk & dairy Products
- Chicken
- Wheat*

* Often a source of carbohydrates but also includes protein.



4. Mueller, Ralf S., Olivry, Thierry, Prelaud, Pascal: Critically appraised topic on adverse food reactions of companion animals (2): common food allergen sources in dogs and cats in BMC Veterinary Research, 2016, 12:9.