

Allergies & Hay Fever Season

Words Dr Danielle Hoolahan - **Clinical Dermatologist**

Like humans, pets can also suffer from allergies and sometimes our four-legged friends scratch themselves unbearably.

Clinical dermatologist, Dr Danielle Hoolahan, from Sydney's Animal Referral Hospital says pets can be tormented by three major types of allergies – flea, food (e.g. beef, chicken) and environmental (e.g. grass, weed, tree pollens, dust mites, mould spores). The most common types of allergies are flea and environmental.

“Pets with flea allergies tend to get itchy on the back half of their body. Animals with a food or environmental allergy are itchy around the face, ears, belly, bottom and paws,” she says.

Many dog breeds, including Golden Retrievers, Labradors and German Shepherds, are predisposed to environmental allergies, often licking their paws which can be mistaken for self grooming. Typically, these patients will show initial clinical signs between six months and three years of age, she says.

“Fortunately, environmental allergies can be well managed through allergen specific immunotherapy (desensitisation). This involves administering allergens that the dog has tested positive to (determined by a skin allergy test or blood test) via injection. This is helpful in approximately 70 per cent of cases,” says Dr Hoolahan.

Food allergies, however, can only be identified through an elimination diet trial in which a novel protein (e.g. kangaroo) and a carbohydrate (e.g. pumpkin) are fed exclusively for eight weeks and then a dietary rechallenge is performed with the pet's previous diet.

“Pets with food allergies will have to avoid the problem foods for the rest of their life,” says Dr Hoolahan.

Re-occurring ear infections a sign of allergies

Six-year-old Spud the Pug (pictured right) was being treated for re-occurring ear infections for most of his life until owner Danielle Sheehan decided to consult her local vet who recognised it was allergies and referred them to the ARH for specialist dermatology treatment.

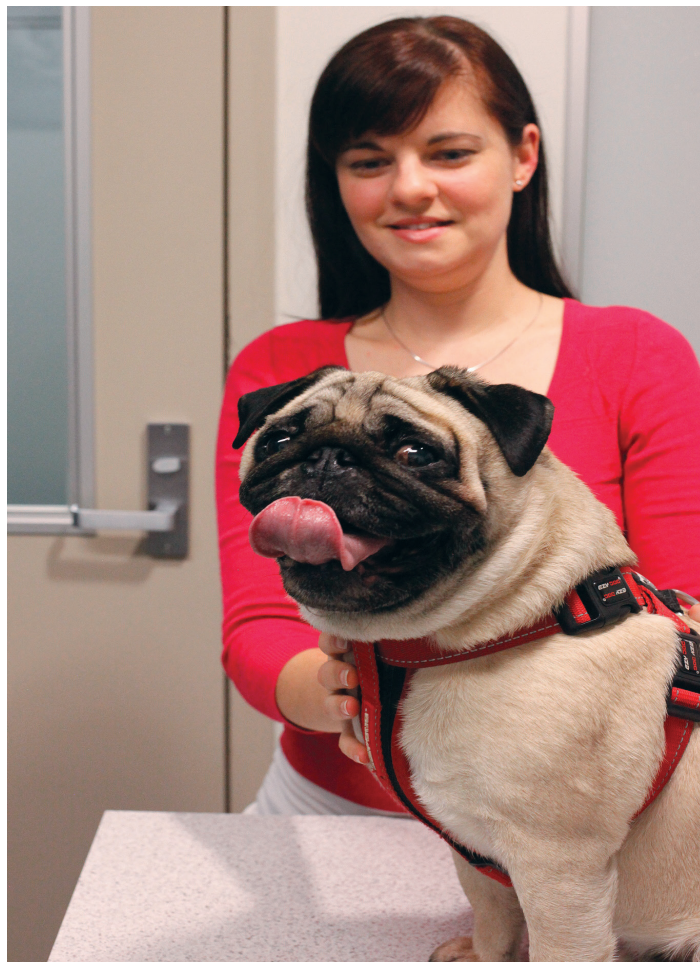
“Spud is the most well-behaved, perfect dog ... except for his allergies,” says Mrs Sheehan (who has another younger Pug named Dexter with no allergies). “Spud would often be scratching his ears and chewing his feet. The sound was annoying. It was getting so bad I knew there was something going on causing the ear infections.”

At the ARH, Dr Hoolahan ran a blood allergy test which revealed Spud was allergic to specific weeds, grasses and moulds. Spud was also placed on an elimination diet trial, consisting of goat and pumpkin for eight weeks to investigate for a potential concurrent food allergy.



“I also clean Spud's ears and nose every day with a dilute vinegar solution. He hates it and is scared of tissues. We have to trick him,” laughs Mrs Sheehan. “Looking back at all those years he would sit on his bed and look so sad. We thought he was depressed because we got Dexter.

He couldn't enjoy life and would be scratching all the time. But not anymore. He's like a puppy again.”



Allergies can be debilitating to pets

Twitch the three-year-old Boxer cross also suffered from such severe environmental and food allergies that her owner considered putting her down to end the pain and suffering.

“Twitch was so itchy she couldn't calm herself,” tells Kate Dawes, a primary school teacher. “She was so distressed and I was distressed watching her running around the house and scratching on the walls, on the carpet, on the furniture - scratching her neck so much she bled. Her ears would get swollen and the ear flaps were hot and red.”



VET CHAT

At the Animal Referral Hospital, a skin allergy test and a blood test revealed Twitch had an allergy to certain trees and moulds. An elimination diet trial and subsequent dietary rechallenge also showed that Twitch suffered from concurrent food allergies. A carefully planned sequential dietary rechallenge identified the problem ingredients and those safe to eat. Twitch has also recently started allergen specific immunotherapy to manage her environmental allergies.

“I’m also much more aware of Twitch’s itchiness level and better at picking up on her reactions. She behaves differently, sooky and clingy, when she’s itchy,” says Ms Dawes. “Twitch is pampered and adored and it was horrific to watch her go through what she did. I never want her to feel that way again.”

If you notice your pet itching, licking and chewing, consult your veterinarian on how to deal with your pet’s discomfort from allergies, says Dr Hoolahan.

Video version of this story with Dr Danielle Hoolahan available via VETtalk TV - <http://bit.ly/1sBakh2>



The Animal Referral Hospital is the largest privately owned 24-hour veterinary hospital in the southern hemisphere, offering pet owners an improved level of service with specialist care and advanced veterinary technology in a state-of-the-art facility. The ARH is situated 20 minutes from most parts of Sydney.

