

Understanding Food Hypersensitivity

Food hypersensitivity is an allergic-like condition that can occur if your pet is sensitive to one or more ingredients in his food. Most of the time, the problem ingredient is a protein (such as beef, chicken, wheat, corn, egg, soy, milk, or fish) and may be found in anything your pet consumes (commercial food, treats, or even table food). The brand of food is often not the culprit, so switching brands probably will not help.

CLINICAL SIGNS

Food hypersensitivity is often referred to as an adverse reaction to food (ARF), and the telltale signs vary from case to case. You may notice itching (especially the face, ears, feet, and anal area) and intermittent vomiting or diarrhea, but other signs can be involved. Many diseases may cause similar signs, so it is important to realize that food hypersensitivity is a difficult diagnosis to make.

DIAGNOSIS

There is no specific test for food hypersensitivity. The diagnosis is usually made after all other possible causes have been ruled out and your pet has completed a food trial. In a food trial, the type and number of protein sources that your pet consumes is limited, and the veterinarian watches for improvement. It can be a tedious process because multiple diets may need to be tried (each with a 3- to 10-week trial time); therefore, patience on your part will be necessary.

TREATMENT

Treatment of food hypersensitivity involves avoiding the proteins to which your pet may be sensitive. Your veterinarian will probably make a specific diet recommendation and request that no treats or table foods be offered during the trial. It might be beneficial for you to keep a diary or journal during this time to help the veterinarian assess your pet's response to the new diet.

YOUR PET'S QUALITY OF LIFE COUNTS

Food hypersensitivity is not an uncommon cause of itchy skin in pets. Periodic vomiting and diarrhea may accompany food hypersensitivity. It can occur alone or in combination with other skin diseases, making diagnosis a challenge for your veterinarian. It is not a life-threatening disease but can be very annoying for you and your pet. Once your veterinarian has identified your pet's condition as being related to food hypersensitivity, however, there are steps that you can take to help treat the problem. Modifying your pet's diet at the recommendation of your veterinarian will likely substantially improve his quality of life.

An Ideal Food Trial

An ideal food trial involves feeding your pet a very digestible protein that he never has had before. This protein is, therefore, considered to be "novel." It is best to use only one source of protein because it may be possible for food hypersensitivity in dogs and cats to occur because of cross-reactivity among species (e.g., chicken and turkey).

Your veterinarian will most likely recommend a commercial diet, although there are homemade diets that you can prepare according to your vet's instructions. The success of any food trial depends on the choice of diet and, more importantly, your willingness to comply with your vet's recommendations – no table food, no treats, no flavored toys, no flavored medication! (If you are giving a flavored heartworm preventative to your pet, ask your vet about replacing it with an unflavored one.)

Ideally, a food trial should last for about 2 months. Your veterinarian will make a tentative diagnosis of food allergy if marked improvement in your pet's clinical signs occurs during the trial. About 80% of pets with food hypersensitivity can be successfully managed with a commercial diet. However, it is important to understand that no diet is inherently hypoallergenic. Thus food allergy may develop with any food product if it is fed long enough.