

Allergies in Dogs and Cats: Understanding Food and Environmental Triggers

If your dog or cat is constantly itchy, scratching, or licking their paws, allergies could be to blame. Just like people, pets can develop allergies to certain foods or things in their environment — and it's one of the most common reasons for veterinary visits.

What Are Pet Allergies?

An allergy occurs when the immune system overreacts to something harmless, like pollen or certain ingredients in food. This reaction causes **itching, redness, and inflammation** of the skin, ears, and sometimes the digestive tract.

Unlike people, who often sneeze or get watery eyes with allergies, **dogs and cats usually show their allergies through their skin.**

Common Signs of Allergies in Pets

Allergies can look different in every animal, but the most common signs include:

- Persistent **itching**, licking, or chewing (especially paws, belly, or face)
- **Red, inflamed skin** or rashes
- **Recurrent ear infections**
- **Hair loss or thinning coat**
- **Sores, scabs, or hot spots**
- **Chronic paw licking or shaking the head**
- In food allergies: **vomiting or diarrhea** may also occur

If your pet has any of these symptoms, it's best to schedule an exam — early management can prevent chronic infections and skin damage.

Types of Allergies in Dogs and Cats

There are three main categories of allergies that affect pets: **environmental (atopy)**, **food**, and **flea** allergies. It's also possible for pets to have more than one type at the same time.

1. Environmental Allergies (Atopy)

Environmental allergies are reactions to things like:

- Pollen (trees, grasses, weeds)
- Dust mites
- Mold spores
- Human dander

These allergens are inhaled or absorbed through the skin. Symptoms often **worsen seasonally** (spring or fall), though in some pets they occur year-round.

Common signs:

Itchy skin, face rubbing, paw licking, and frequent ear infections.

Diagnosis & management:

Your veterinarian may recommend:

- **Allergy testing** (blood or skin testing) to identify specific triggers
- **Medications** such as antihistamines, corticosteroids, or immune-modulating drugs (like Apoquel® or Cytopoint® for dogs, Atopica® for cats)
- **Regular bathing** with medicated or hypoallergenic shampoos to remove allergens from the skin
- **Allergen-specific immunotherapy (allergy shots or drops)** for long-term management

Environmental allergies are **not curable**, but with proper treatment, symptoms can be kept well under control.

2. Food Allergies

Food allergies occur when the immune system reacts to a specific ingredient in the diet — usually a **protein source** such as:

- Chicken
- Beef
- Fish
- Dairy
- Eggs

Food allergies can develop at any age, even after eating the same diet for years.

Common signs:

Itchy skin (especially around the face, paws, or ears), chronic ear infections, or gastrointestinal issues such as vomiting and diarrhea.

Diagnosis & management:

The only reliable way to diagnose a food allergy is through an **elimination diet trial**:

1. Your pet eats a special prescription or hydrolyzed diet for **8–12 weeks**.
2. All other foods, treats, and flavored medications are eliminated.
3. If symptoms improve and then return when the old food is reintroduced, a food allergy is confirmed.

Once the offending ingredient is identified, your pet can be maintained on a diet that **avoids that allergen**.

3. Flea Allergy Dermatitis

Even one flea bite can cause intense itching in allergic pets. The reaction is to flea saliva, not the flea itself.

Common signs:

Severe itchiness, especially around the base of the tail and back legs, scabs, and hair loss.

Prevention is key:

Year-round **flea control** for all pets in the household is the best way to prevent flare-ups.

Working With Your Veterinarian

Allergies can be frustrating to diagnose and manage, but your veterinary team is here to help. Because many allergies look alike, your vet may recommend a **step-by-step approach**, ruling out fleas and infections first, then evaluating for food or environmental causes.

Management often includes:

- Controlling itch with safe medications
 - Treating secondary skin or ear infections
 - Improving skin health with omega-3 supplements or special diets
 - Identifying and avoiding allergy triggers where possible
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Living With an Allergic Pet

While allergies can't usually be "cured," they can be **successfully controlled**. Many pets live comfortably for years with the right combination of diet, medications, and skin care.

You can help by:

- Following your vet's treatment plan closely
 - Using prescribed flea prevention regularly
 - Bathing your pet as recommended
 - Avoiding unapproved foods during diet trials
 - Scheduling rechecks to monitor progress
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Allergies are one of the most common causes of itching and skin problems in dogs and cats. Whether triggered by food, fleas, or the environment, allergies can be managed effectively with help from your veterinarian.

With patience, teamwork, and proper care, you can help your pet feel comfortable again — and get back to enjoying life itch-free.