

Atopy

or atopic dermatitis



Just like people, animals can also suffer from allergies, and atopy is one form of allergy. Atopy is an allergic reaction (hypersensitivity) to common constituents in your animal's environment, such as house dust mites, pollens, moulds... Atopic dermatitis is generally hereditary. A 10-30% incidence is reported in dogs affected with skin diseases.

Symptoms

In 70% of the cases, the symptoms will begin between 1 to 3 years old (3 months-7 years). They will be seasonal in some pets, if the implicated allergens are pollens, for example.

In affected dogs and cats, the main symptom will be itchiness, affecting mostly the face, legs, armpits and abdomen. The pet that feels itchy will scratch, lick, bite and chew at itself. In certain cases, there will be excessive loss of hair, redness, ear inflammation (otitis) and skin infections (bacterial and/or yeast). Some cats can also develop eosinophilic plaques and granulomas, and lip ulcers (indolent ulcers).

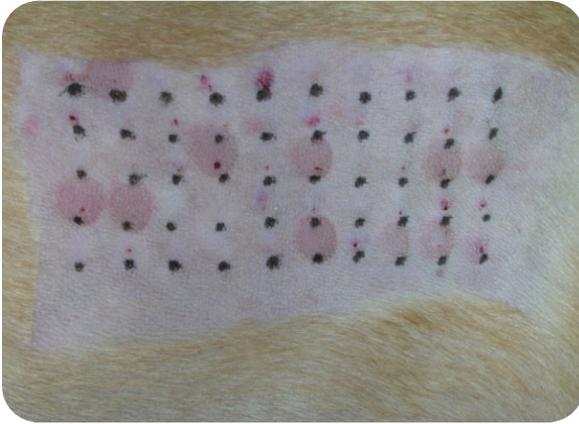
Diagnosis

Even if your veterinarian highly suspects atopy, he will sometimes have to perform different diagnostic tests to rule out other diseases that can present with similar symptoms: anti-parasitic treatments, hypoallergenic diet, etc.



Allergic otitis in an atopic dog: note the inflammation of the ear pinna





Intradermal allergy test in a dog

Once the diagnosis has been made, an allergy test can be done to identify the offending allergens. Two types of tests are available: the cutaneous test (intradermal skin test), which is currently considered as the gold standard. It consists in injections of allergen extracts (≈ 50) in the skin and observing positive reactions in the following 30 minutes.

The second technique, the serologic test, is made on a blood sample, on which the levels of antibodies against a list of allergens are measured.

Treatment of atopic dermatitis

1. Avoid allergen (s)

Avoiding the allergen is the best way to treat atopy since it does not require any medications. However, this is rarely possible since most of the allergens in the environment are impossible to avoid.

2. Symptomatic treatment:

This consists in controlling the symptoms with the administration of cortisone derivatives, antihistamines, cyclosporine, essential fatty acids... These medications do not result in a cure but relieve the animal as long as they are given. The major disadvantages of this approach are:

- 🐾 The potential side effects of medication, especially with cortisone derivatives, depending on the dosage and frequency of administration.
- 🐾 The cost, which can become quite elevated depending on the size of your animal, doses required, frequency of administration...

These symptomatic medications are recommended in certain cases:

- 🐾 When allergies are seasonal (2-3 months per year).
- 🐾 When dosages required are acceptable for you animal and your budget.
- 🐾 During the lag period at the start of immunotherapy (desensitisation) or to complement it.
- 🐾 When allergy testing and desensitisation are not option.

3. Immunotherapy (hyposensitisation, desensitisation):

Refer to clinical sheet on Allergen specific immunotherapy for more details

Allergen specific immunotherapy consists of subcutaneous injections of increasing doses of allergens to which your animal reacted on the allergy test. This is the treatment of choice for most atopic pets. Approximately 70% to 80% of the cases will experience significant improvement, without side effects that can develop with chronic cortisone administration, for example.

Desensitization proceeds in 2 phases: the induction period (approximately 8 weeks), where injections are administered once a week with increasing doses and the maintenance phase, where injections are given generally every 10-14 days.

Several months (between 3-12 months in general) can pass before the beneficial effect of immunotherapy can be seen. If the improvement is significant, we usually recommend that the injections should be administered for a few years.

Whichever therapy is used, the final goal is to make your pet comfortable and happy, and each treatment will be individualised according to your needs and capacities.