



FLEA ALLERGY

What are allergies, and how do they affect dogs?

One of the most common conditions affecting dogs is allergy. In the allergic state, the dog's immune system "overreacts" to foreign substances (allergens or antigens) to which it is exposed. These overreactions are manifested in three ways. The most common is itching of the skin, either localised (one area) or generalised (all over the dog). Another manifestation involves the respiratory system and may result in coughing, sneezing, and/or wheezing. Sometimes, there may be an associated nasal or ocular (eye) discharge. The third manifestation involves the digestive system, resulting in vomiting or diarrhoea. The specific response that occurs is related to the allergen and the individual animal's immune system.

What is meant by the term flea allergy?

In spite of common belief, a normal dog experiences only minor skin irritation in response to flea bites. Even in the presence of dozens of fleas, there will be very little itching. On the other hand, the flea allergic dog has a severe, itch-producing reaction to flea bites. This occurs because the dog develops an allergic response to the flea's saliva. When the dog is bitten, flea saliva is deposited in the skin. Just one bite causes intense itching and this is of a long lasting nature.

What does this reaction do to the dog?

The dog's response to the intense itching is to chew, lick, or scratch. This causes hair loss and can lead to open sores or scabs on the skin, allowing a secondary bacterial infection to begin. The area most commonly involved is over the rump (just in front of the tail). This is probably because fleas find this part of the dog more desirable. Many flea-allergic dogs also chew or lick the hair off their legs.

What is the proper treatment?

Anti-inflammatories are used to block the allergic reaction and give relief from the itch. Some dogs develop a secondary bacterial infection on the inflamed skin making things worse. When this occurs, appropriate antibiotics must be used. Medicated shampoos are also of great help and may be suggested.

The most important treatment for flea allergy is to get the dog away from all fleas or else the reaction starts again when the medicines are stopped. Therefore, strict flea control is mandatory and this involves ensuring the dog is flea-free and also removing fleas from the environment. There are many products available for flea control, and many work in entirely different manners. In some cases, multiple products may be needed. Some are used on the dog and some on the dog's environment. We can advise on the most effective treatments for your individual situation.

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