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ALLERGIC DERMATITIS IN CATS

When cats get allergies, they don't get runny eyes or noses. The most common symptoms of allergies in cats are skin eruptions and itchiness. When cats are itchy, they lick. When they lick, they take hair off the itchy spot. Sometimes, all we notice is an area of hair loss. Sometimes we find little scabs over the neck or rump. And sometimes we just see a raw spot.

The most frequent things that cats are allergic to 1) are the protein in flea saliva, 2) certain proteins in the food, 3) and certain proteins they might inhale or come in contact with, like pollens, mold spores, and dust mites. Sound familiar all you hay fever sufferers out there? And just like with people, cats can develop allergies to things that they may have been around for years.

We always go after fleas first, even if we don't see evidence of them. A reaction to flea saliva is responsible for most allergic skin disease in cats. It can be hard to document a flea problem on these cats because they are grooming themselves so much. Cats do a great job of cleaning up fleas and flea dirt under normal circumstances, but when they are itchy, they spend a lot more time at it. They can groom so much that they get rid of every shred of evidence that a flea was ever there. Everything, except the skin lesion itself. Just because you can't find evidence of fleas on your cat does not mean that there isn't a problem. We will always recommend flea control on the cat and in the home when your cat has this kind of problem. Even if that's not what's causing the problem, we have to treat to rule it out.

The primary meat protein in the food is another common instigator of skin problems. Beef, fish, and dairy products are common offenders, sometimes chicken is too. We will often recommend a diet that eliminates these proteins. There are hypoallergenic diets where the protein has been "cut" into pieces so small that they fly under the radar and don't trigger an immune response. There are also exotic protein diets that use lamb, venison or rabbit. Both types of diets are commercially available and are well tolerated. An elimination trial must last 6 - 12 weeks. That's how long it takes for the problem protein to leave the body so we can see if the new food will work.

Pollens, dust mites and other environmental proteins can cause allergic skin disease. We'll talk about the value of skin testing and hyposensitization as options with these cases. Other things can cause similar changes in the skin. Fungal infections like ringworm, immune disorders, skin cancer, and other parasites are some of the diseases that we want to be on the lookout for. Testing to rule out these other conditions may include fungal culture, skin scrapings, and skin biopsies.

Treating skin allergies may be done in one of two ways. We can try to prevent the cat from coming into contact with the protein that is causing the problem, or we can use medicines that will help block the immune response that occurs once the protein gets into the cats body. Ideally, removing the offending agent is the preferable route. The drugs that are used to decrease the immune response, like steroids, sometimes have medical consequences that we want to avoid. We want to take time to discuss your treatment options so that we can choose the method with which you are most comfortable.