

understanding Food Allergies

— by Dr. Sally Perea



Dogfish: We are what we eat. Photographed at the annual Hyde Park Pumpkin Patch Halloween Costume Contest, co-hosted by Downtown Dogs and benefiting Humane Society of Tampa Bay.

Just like humans, allergies can make a pet's life miserable. Many environmental allergens, like pollen, mold or fleas, can be distinguished by a skin test and treated at your veterinarian's office. But many pet parents don't realize an animal's diet can also have a tremendous impact on its skin, coat and digestion.

Unfortunately, pets could be allergic to anything, but a food allergy requires previous exposure. Therefore, the most frequently reported culprits are often ingredients that are found in a majority of commercial pet foods. Common ingredients reported to cause allergic reactions in dogs include beef, dairy and wheat since they are so commonly used. On the other hand, cats are frequently prone to beef, dairy, fish and barley/wheat allergies since these are common ingredients used in cat food.

In most pets, the development of a food allergy is delayed, meaning symptoms may not manifest until the pet has eaten the food for months or even up to a year or more. Typical signs of an allergy include itchy skin with scratching and biting or chewing, which can cause skin lesions, as well as gastrointestinal problems, such as soft stools, diarrhea and/or vomiting. Often these can be accompanied by itchy ears and potentially a secondary ear infection.

Because every dog's diet history is unique, it's sometimes very difficult to determine what food is the problem. The gold standard for diagnosing food allergies is an elimination diet. The first priority is to visit your veterinarian to eliminate other

potential causes, such as gastrointestinal or skin parasites, or an underlying metabolic disease. The next step is to determine the diet history of your pet – everything she has eaten previously.

Pet parents will choose a diet that does not include any of those ingredients that have been previously fed. By eliminating all foods that a companion has been exposed to in the past, your companion is likely to receive novel – or uncommon – ingredients, such as venison, rabbit or duck. Be sure to also check flavored items, such as treats, heartworm medications and toothpastes, for ingredients used for flavoring.

Keeping foods simple with potentially just one protein source and one carbohydrate source is suggested. Typically, a limited ingredient food like California Natural, which has the shortest ingredients list of any dry pet food, is recommended. This minimizes the number of potential allergens in the diet that can cause allergic reactions or stomach issues for pets.

Another great option is EVO 95% meat canned pet foods. More simplified than many canned formulas, EVO uses a minimal amount of protein sources. EVO is also a grain-free option, eliminating many common allergens right from the start.

Many veterinarians have turned to hydrolyzed protein diets for patients who cannot find a novel food source or have not been keeping track of their pet's diet history. In this type of prescription diet, the proteins are hydrolyzed into small fragments so the immune system cannot recognize or react to the allergen. However, these foods are significantly more expensive, and some pets with severe allergies may not respond.

Typically a pet parent will see a significant improvement in gastrointestinal signs within four weeks if the food allergen causing a problem has been avoided completely and resolution of other clinical symptoms like skin itching or ear problems within about 12 weeks. In the meantime, prescribed medications from the veterinarian can be used to alleviate discomfort and control inflammation.

While it has not been proven, some believe that by rotating a pet's diet every few months your companion will not have enough time to build up an allergy to any ingredients. On the other hand, others suggest keeping a steady diet throughout a pet's life to avoid exposure to other potential allergens. Veterinarians recommend that if a diet is healthy and working well for your individual pet, then rotation is not necessary. But if you have found two formulas that work well for your companion, those foods can be rotated for increased palatability.

Careful reading of pet food labels and a high-quality food will go a long way in helping pet parents minimize their four-legged family members' discomfort. Remember, pets depend on us for more than just room and board, but to also enhance and enrich their lives. 🐾