**Atopy/Environmental Allergies in Dogs**

**What is Atopy?**

Atopy is a predisposition to severe immune allergic reactions. We see it most commonly with environmental allergies in dogs (ex: dead leaves, pollen, grasses, trees, dust, ect). In atopic dermatitis, airborne particles gain entry to the skin through a defective skin barrier. The immune system becomes inflamed by the airborne allergens and soon the itching, licking, and scratching begins. The allergens come from the air, but the itch is felt in the skin.

**Why does my dog seem to suddenly have atopy?**

The severity of the reactions can wax and wane throughout each year and season but commonly get worse with repeated exposure. We frequently see initial reactions occur between 1-3 years in age, but can happen earlier or later in life as well. If your pet is new to the area, it's very likely that they were not previously exposed to the allergens in the local environment and that is why it was not seen until now.

**How may the atopy present?**

Atopy can present itself a few different ways. Unlike people, who get hay fever signs, dogs get skin signs. Some of the most common things we see is excessive itching or licking of the face, ears, feet, belly, and armpits. Heavy licking causes rusty colored straining of the fur, feet, etc. Not every dog exhibits symptoms in all these areas. Without intervention and treatment, dogs will frequently continue going after these areas until they cause a secondary infection.

**Secondary infections?**

We have to clear up secondary infections as part of treating allergies. We commonly see yeast or bacterial infections either on the skin or in the ears as the most common secondary form of infection. This is usually from the area being kept moist and irritated from the pet’s itchiness, which breaks down the skin’s natural barrier. At our hospital, we would start with a cytology to diagnose what the specific type of infection is so we can send home the appropriate combination of medications. These could include oral medications, drops in the ears, topical spray, and/or a topical shampoo. Oral medications for secondary infections should always be finished unless concerns arise.

**Can’t I just give them an antihistamine? What can I give them?**

Antihistamines have been popular for many years for pets (because we didn’t have anything better), but they just don’t work that well in dogs. Unlike in people, they do not block the production of chemicals that causes allergies. There are chemicals other than histamines that mediate allergies in pets. There are currently only two products on the market that are specifically designed for dog allergies. *Apoquel* (an oral medication) and *Cytopoint* (an injectable medication). Both of these products are currently under patent so no generics are currently available.

*Apoquel* is a JAK inhibitor medication. JAK is an allergy mediator in dogs. It is an oral medication that blocks the itchy signal. We see a fast improvement on itching in a day or two. It is only effective when it is given, so if you aren't giving it regularly you are more likely to have secondary infections breakthrough. This medication is not recommended for dogs under the age of 1 year old. Reward program available with Zoetis.

*Cytopoint* is a monoclonal antibody genetically engineered to target a type of chemical which is the prominent cause of the itchy feeling dogs experience. *Cytopoint* blocks the chemical from causing the itchiness. Once given, *Cytopoint* works fairly quickly, usually seeing relief from itching in 24 hrs. This medication can last from 3-6 weeks depending on the season and dog. If you are up to date with your annual exam with us, you can usually come in just to get the *Cytopoint* unless you have additional concerns. *Cytopoint* has been shown to be most effective if 2-3 injections are given a month apart when initially starting this option.

We may sometimes prescribe an anti-inflammatory steroid (i.e. *prednisone*). Steroids are less targeted towards allergies specifically but can still help in many situations and may be recommended for your dog.

**How long will my dog need atopy medications?**

Allergies are almost always going to be a lifelong problem. Unlike people who may outgrow their allergies, dogs' allergies frequently get worse with exposure and age. Length of treatment is dependent on the individual. Some dogs will need to stay on allergy medications year round to prevent the secondary infections and others may only need it for a few months or even just during season changes. We will frequently start with a month of medication and see if the itching resolves after finishing the allergy medications. If you start seeing your dog itch or lick again then give us a call and we can refill the *Apoquel* tablets or get you in for another *Cytopoint* injection.

**What else can I do to help my dog?**

The easiest additional step you can do is to help keep the allergens off of your dog's fur/skin. The best way to do this is to give regular baths. Any mild oatmeal or soothing shampoo will help remove allergens but a medicated shampoo may be recommended if evidence of a skin infection is found. Medicated shampoos can be used 1-2 times weekly, and a non-medicated shampoo can be used up to 3 times weekly. Be sure to follow lathering directions when using medicated shampoos and rinse with cool water. You can also use a cool water washcloth to help with the removal of allergens on a daily basis, just wiping their paws or body down after a walk. There are also medicated wipes that you can use on specific areas (I.e. the feet, face/skin folds, inner thighs). Best time to use these is after coming in from outside and/or before bed. *Douxo Calm* is a non-medicated allergy shampoo that helps to maintain the skin's natural barrier and is a good one to try for at home use.

Omega 3 fatty acids have specific anti-inflammatory properties which can be used in hand with allergy medications to help mitigate some of the inflammation response. The dose needed to be helpful is fairly high so please talk with us first about where to start and what your top dose goal should be. Whenever we are adding in any supplements, we should add them in slowly, as too much too quickly can cause loose stools. It takes up to two months to get to the levels needed to start seeing if the omega 3’s will be helpful.