

Dogs and cats can also suffer from allergies, but there are ways to help

BY LAURA UNGAR - AP news

About five years ago, Gail Friedman noticed her Parson Russell Terrier was constantly licking his paws and seemed super uncomfortable.

“The poor dog. I would put baby socks on his feet so that he wouldn’t lick them or bite at them,” said Friedman, of Oak Brook, Illinois. “I was constantly changing the socks, washing his feet a lot. Nothing worked.”

It turned out her canine companion, Mr. Friedman, had allergies.

It’s a common and tricky problem in pets — caused by various things such as pollen, dust, mold, chemicals and food — but veterinarians say there are several ways to ease their suffering.

What sorts of allergies do dogs and cats get?

Allergies happen when the immune system overreacts to a foreign substance. Cats and dogs react to many of the same things people do, as well as pests like fleas.

There are no definitive recent statistics on how many pets have allergies, but research suggests the problem is growing.

“I probably see allergic dogs and cats every single day, probably multiple times a day,” said Dr. Karen Woodard, medical director at Thrive Pet Healthcare-Elmhurst in Illinois.

About 90% of allergic pets react to environmental triggers, Woodard said, and the rest have food allergies only.

Dog breeds that are especially vulnerable include various types of terriers, boxers and bulldogs; in cats, it’s Persians, Siamese and Himalayans.

Pets can even be allergic to other animals — cats to dogs, dogs to cats and either to another species.

“It’s possible for them to be allergic to us, just like we are to

them,” said Thrive’s Dr. Anthea Elliott Schick of Scottsdale, Arizona, immediate past president of the American College of Veterinary Dermatology.

How can you tell if your pet has allergies?

Allergic cats and dogs aren’t as likely as humans to sneeze and cough. More often, they scratch and lick themselves, shake their heads and develop ear infections.

Woodard said her Yorkie mix, Teddy, had the classic signs — scratching around his shoulders and getting rashes and ear infections starting as a six-month-old puppy. She lived in the South at the time, and he tested positive for allergies to various trees and grasses there.

A common sign of allergies in her feline patients is “overdoing their grooming,” said Woodard, who’s on the Chicago Veterinary Medical Association’s board of directors. “Cats shouldn’t be pulling their hair out when they groom. So if you start seeing bald patches on your cat, even though the skin underneath it looks normal, that could be a sign of allergies.”

Even food allergies, often to chicken, beef, lamb or other protein sources, frequently show up on the skin, although pets can have vomiting or diarrhea, too.

Rarely, pets can develop life-threatening anaphylactic reactions, perhaps after being stung by an insect. But most allergies are simply miserable for the animals.

“It breaks my heart because it gets to a point that not only do I have socks on poor Mr. Friedman — which is humiliating for him — he sometimes gets so bad he has to wear the cone of shame,” Gail Friedman said. “And that’s not fair because he can’t move around right, he can’t sleep right. It’s terrible.”

How can you help your pet?

The first step is to get a diagnosis

from the vet. This could involve allergy testing, or in the case of food allergies, an “elimination diet,” which involves feeding limited ingredients the pet hasn’t previously eaten.

If the allergy culprit is environmental, there are medications like anti-inflammatory drugs and newer oral and injectable medications for dogs to block chemical signals associated with itchiness. Food allergies may be treated with special diets such as “hydrolyzed” food, in which proteins are chemically broken down into tiny pieces.

All this can get expensive. Friedman estimates she’s spent about \$10,000 on testing, medication and care for Mr. Friedman and another allergic dog.

But vets say there are also ways to help pets at home by cleaning their bedding frequently, wiping their fur with a wet washcloth and giving them baths.

Outdoors, “they’re almost acting like little Swiffers, getting allergens on their skin, and it goes through their skin and actually becomes a problem,” Schick said. “We say bathe your dog, at a minimum, once a week if they’re allergic.”

After she’s tried nearly everything, Friedman’s dogs are still vexed by allergies. But they’re doing better.

“I’m going to keep experimenting until we find what stops it completely,” she said. “All you can do is try.”

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