

Atopic Dermatitis in Dogs

Emily Rothstein, DVM, DACVD

BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Atopic dermatitis is a genetically inherited, recurrent, itchy skin disease that is associated most commonly with an allergy to environmental allergens. The average age at onset is 1-3 years. Predisposed breeds include the boxer, Chihuahua, Gordon setter, Yorkshire terrier, cairn terrier, Boston terrier, Chinese shar-pei, Labrador retriever, golden retriever, West Highland white terrier, English setter, Irish setter, English bulldog, American cocker spaniel, pug, Dalmatian, Scottish terrier, wire fox terrier, miniature schnauzer, Belgian tervuren, Shiba inu, and Beauceron. There is no sex predilection in dogs.

Causes

Allergens are substances in the environment that cause allergic reactions. These can be pollens, house dust and house dust mites, mold spores, even feathers. Allergens cause reactions by sticking to the skin and thereby alerting the skin to that allergen. That is often why a dog will rub its face, lick its feet, and so on.

Clinical Signs

Mild to severe itchiness of the ears, face, axillae (armpits), feet, and belly occurs. Ear infections are common, as are bacterial and yeast infections caused by the scratching. Signs occur either during a specific pollen season or year round, depending on what the pet is allergic to. Common areas affected in the dog are face, the back of the front legs, and where the front legs and chest meet.

Diagnostic Tests

Diagnosis is often based on a history of itching, scratching, licking, and/or biting the body. Itchiness may occur seasonally or year round, depending on what the animal is allergic to. Your veterinarian also must eliminate other itchy skin diseases, such as parasites. Allergy testing can be supportive of the diagnosis and can be done by intradermal skin testing or blood testing. Both tests can give false-positive and false-negative results, however.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

Treatment is designed to make the pet more comfortable. It is not possible to cure environmental allergy, and dogs do not typically

outgrow their allergies as humans do. Components of therapy involve the following:

- Allergy shots (immunotherapy) may be formulated based on results of allergy testing. Usually, the owner is taught by the veterinarian, and the shots are given by the owner at home. Initially, a low dose of dilute allergens is given, and then concentration and dose are increased. The rate of increase is scheduled to fit each patient. It may take up to 1 year to see beneficial results.
- Antihistamines can be used long term to control the itch. Sometimes these drugs are used alone, sometimes in conjunction with allergy shots or other therapy (such as fatty acids or steroids).
- Omega-3 fatty acids help reduce skin inflammation, are very safe, and are usually given in conjunction with other therapies.
- Glucocorticoids (steroids, cortisone) can be used in the short term to control the itch.
- Cyclosporine (*Atopica*) may control clinical signs in some dogs.
- Topical therapy may also be tried. Routine bathing removes allergens. Lime sulfur dips can help reduce the itch. Rinses containing anti-itch medications help some pets but must be applied 1-3 times per week to be effective. Sprays containing steroids and other anti-itch medications can be used frequently to control the itch.
- Treatment of bacterial and yeast infections is often indicated.
- Strict flea control is important, because fleas worsen the problem, especially if the pet is also flea allergic.

Follow-up Care

Atopic dermatitis is a lifelong disease and requires long-term management. Recheck examinations are warranted to minimize flare-ups and to monitor response to treatment. As the seasons rotate and time goes on, modifications to therapy are often needed, so good communication between owner and veterinarian is essential. Occasionally, retesting for new allergies may be needed.

Prognosis

Atopic dermatitis is not curable but is manageable. The many therapeutic options can be tailored to fit different dogs and the abilities of their owners.