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Food Allergies – Elimination Diets

Among pets, food allergies are the cause in 10-20% of dogs and cats with allergies. Signs of food allergies are similar to airborne allergies except there is little variation in the intensity of itching from one season to another. The age of onset is variable. The distribution and intensity of itching varies between animals. Food allergies can also cause gastrointestinal signs such as chronic or episodic vomiting and diarrhoea. Some animals may have both skin and gastro signs or just one of the above.

There is no reliable diagnostic test other than feeding a hypoallergenic diet and seeing if the itching or gastro signs resolve. This is called an elimination diet. Your veterinarian should be consulted to develop a specific plan for your dog.

The key point in any elimination diet is that ONLY the hypoallergenic diet can be fed. Anything that the dog usually eats or has in their mouth is part of the elimination protocol and CANNOT be consumed e.g. their regular kibble/wet food, raw meat, fruit, veges, food scraps, treats, chews given for parasite control, bones and toothpastes.

In New Zealand, we are lucky to have two fantastic food brands offering prescription diets for use in elimination diets.

Royal Canin Hypoallergenic, Royal Canin Anallergenic and Hills Z/D.

These diets are based on hydrolysed proteins and carbohydrates and are completely balanced. This means the protein particles have been broken down into such tiny pieces the immune system cannot react to them anymore. Your dog's immune system should not perceive the minuscule protein molecules as a threat and therefore should not respond by creating an allergic reaction.

The hypoallergenic diet should be fed for 6 weeks MINIMUM and up to 3 months for full effect. If marked or complete resolution in clinical signs occurs during the elimination diet trial, food allergy can be suspected.

To confirm that a food allergy exists, and improvement was not just coincidental, the animal must be given their previously fed diet and a relapse of signs must occur. The return of signs is usually between 1 hour and 14 days post introduction of the old food. Once a food allergy is confirmed, the elimination diet should be resumed until clinical signs disappear, which usually takes less than 14 days.

Once your pet is symptom free again, ingredients should be added to the elimination diet one by one. What this looks like is introducing one ingredient at a time e.g. give your pet one meal of cooked plain chicken and wait for an allergy response for up to 14 days. If signs reappear, the individual ingredient is considered a cause of the food allergy.

The foods dogs and cats are most often allergic to include beef, chicken, eggs, corn, wheat, soy, and milk. Trial these first.

Once the offending allergens are identified, control of the food allergy is by strict avoidance.

Concurrent diseases may complicate the identification of underlying food allergies. Infrequently, a dog will react to new food allergens as the dog ages.