

Allergy Treatment in Dogs

Rocky Mountain Veterinary Dermatology

Treatment of Allergies in Dogs

Allergic disease in dogs is similar to the same condition in people, and is only **rarely cured**. Fortunately, there are several treatment options that can control your pet's discomfort. Dr. Strauss is committed to finding a long term solution that is right for you *and* your pet.

Medications Used:

Hyposensitization (allergy injections) – Injections often take between 4-12 months to become effective. They provide excellent control of allergic symptoms in 65% of cases. They help another 15% but are not completely perfect, and provide no benefits for about 20% of cases. By injecting natural extracts of what the animal is allergic to the immune system builds a tolerance to the offending substance and the allergy is controlled. This is a **very safe and well tolerated** form of therapy, but like all treatments for allergies, it must be used continuously to keep your dog comfortable. This therapy is expensive initially, but may be the **least expensive and safest therapy in the long term**.

Cortisone (steroids) – This type of drug is the most frequently used form of therapy. It is **very effective at controlling the symptoms of allergies, and is reasonably priced but can have many side effects**.

- *Tablets* – Several types of cortisone are available in oral tablet form and one may provide relief when another does not. The most desirable regimen of therapy is alternate day treatment utilizing a low dose of a short acting form such as Methylprednisolone (brand named Medrol).
- *Injectables* – These generally provide relief of symptoms for 2-6 weeks. Injections are not recommended because they cannot be as easily adjusted to fit the pet's needs, and cannot be withdrawn in case of side effects; however they can be used in a few select cases when circumstances require them.

Side effects of cortisone therapy:

Very few major side effects will be produced if low dose, alternate day treatments can be used. However, four categories of changes may occur whenever cortisone medications are used. At higher or more frequent dosing, side effects become more likely and more obvious. A balance between symptom treatment and side effects must be achieved, and this can vary widely between individual animals, and may change over time for a number of reasons.

- *First* – May cause an increased thirst and appetite. This is not harmful but if water intake is increased the pet will have to be allowed outside more frequently to urinate. If food consumption is not closely regulated most dogs will gain weight.

- *Second* – May produce a change in body metabolism whereby body protein is broken down and stored in the liver. Clinically, breakdown of body protein may lead to thin or poor hair coat, thinner skin, a decrease in muscle mass (especially the abdominal muscles resulting in the pet having a potbellied appearance), and enlargement of the liver. These changes are disconcerting aesthetically and can predispose to serious orthopedic injuries (knee, hip, or back injuries).
- *Third* – May lead to chronic urinary tract infections which may or may not have obvious clinical signs. It is therefore recommended that a urine culture be done at least every six months while on steroid therapy.
- *Fourth* – When steroids are used in **high doses for longer terms** (longer than 6 months) pets are predisposed to developing pancreatitis and stomach ulcers– serious and sometimes life threatening conditions.

Antihistamines – May be helpful in controlling mild allergies or allow the use of a reduced dose of cortisone. Often one type of antihistamine will work when another will not. Therefore, we routinely dispense three different antihistamines (hydroxyzine, diphenhydramine, and chlorpheniramine) and use each for two weeks to see which works best. **Antihistamines are safe for short or long term use** and exert their effects quickly (within a few doses). They generally have to be given three times daily for maximum effectiveness and are relatively inexpensive.

Cyclosporine (Atopica) – This is a newer medication for the treatment of allergies. We have found it to be helpful in about 70% of cases. **It is safe for long term use** (unlike steroids), but can cause stomach and intestinal upset in about 20% of dogs who try it. It takes 2-6 weeks to reach maximum effectiveness. **This is an expensive medication**, but because of its safety many people are interested in trying it.

Adjunctive treatments (used in some cases):

Shampoos – Benzoyl peroxide shampoos used every 4-7 days are very beneficial in removing excessive accumulation of oil, scale and surface bacteria. A tar and sulfur shampoo may be used to slow down the turnover rate of the skin which helps prevent excessive scaling. A conditioner is generally recommended following the shampoo as it is soothing and prevents skin drying. **Shampoos are not generally effective at controlling allergies by themselves.**

Antibiotics – Used to control **secondary bacterial infection** when it is contributing significantly to the dermatitis. Bacterial skin infections are very common in dogs with allergies. In some cases, several weeks of antibiotics will be needed to get the infection under control. In recurrent cases, periodic long term use of antibiotics may be required. Oral antibiotics are **safe and well tolerated by most dogs**; however, some dogs can get stomach or intestinal upset from these medications.