

Allergies in pets

Millions of pets suffer from allergies, and the signs can be just as uncomfortable for pets as they are frustrating for owners. Because allergies can have many different triggers, identifying the cause and finding the right treatment often take time and may require repeated veterinary visits. Your veterinarian will partner with you to develop a diagnostic and treatment plan tailored to your pet's specific needs.

What are the signs of allergies in pets?

Allergies can affect pets in different ways. Possible signs include:

SKIN PROBLEMS

- Excessive scratching, licking, biting, chewing, rubbing, or rolling
- Overgrooming (cats)
- Redness or inflammation
- Hair loss
- Hot spots or skin infections

RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS

- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Repeated snorting or honking sounds ("reverse sneezing")
- Difficulty breathing

EAR PROBLEMS

- Head shaking
- Recurrent ear infections
- Redness
- Odor

DIGESTIVE PROBLEMS

- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Gas
- Abdominal pain

BEHAVIOR CHANGES

- Lethargy
- Irritability

Many of these signs also can signal other health problems, so **it's important to contact your veterinarian when you notice them**. If an allergy is the cause, prompt veterinary care can quickly help relieve your pet's discomfort and reduce the risk of secondary infections or other complications.

What are some common types of allergies in pets?

Allergies are essentially an exaggerated or inappropriate response of the immune system to a substance that's normally harmless—called an allergen. Understanding the most common types of allergies in pets can help pet owners recognize potential triggers.

Flea allergies: Some pets are allergic to flea saliva. Even just a few flea bites can trigger an intense reaction in sensitive animals.

Food allergies: Some pets develop an exaggerated immune response to specific ingredients in their food. This type of allergy is often considered after parasites or environmental allergies have been ruled out. It is not the same as food sensitivity or intolerance, which does not involve the immune system.

Environmental allergies: Environmental allergies typically are triggered by substances like pollen, mold or mildew, or irritants like dust, dirt, and chemicals, which can cling to fur and paws. The most common form is allergic skin disease (atopic dermatitis). Allergic rhinitis (inflammation of the lining of the nose) is less common.

How are allergies diagnosed in pets?

Diagnosing allergies in pets usually involves a step-by-step process to first rule out other causes of the signs your pet is showing and then identify the specific trigger. This process can take time and patience.

Typically, your veterinarian will review your pet's previous medical records and ask questions about:

- Age when signs first began
- Itchiness level
- External parasite prevention
- Diet and treats
- Environment
- Previous treatments and how effective they were

A thorough physical exam is an important part of the discovery process and can help to reveal any external parasites and infections.

Based on these findings, your veterinarian may recommend skin scrapings, skin and/or ear cytology (microscope examination of cells), bloodwork, intradermal skin testing, or other diagnostic tests. If other types of allergies are ruled out, a food allergy may be suspected. In that case, your veterinarian will recommend a dietary elimination trial to identify the triggering diet ingredient(s) and some suitable alternatives.

How are allergies treated in pets?

Many pets with allergies require lifelong treatment. The type of treatment depends on the cause and the severity of your pet's signs. Treatment may need to be adjusted based on your pet's response.

To relieve itchiness and inflammation, your veterinarian may recommend medications that block or reduce the inflammatory response associated with allergies. Pets with allergy-related wounds, skin infections, or ear infections may need additional treatment.

Once a diagnosis is made, your veterinarian may recommend steps to reduce your pet's exposure to the allergen(s), such as:

- Continuous flea control for pets with flea allergies
- Prescription hydrolyzed or novel-protein diets for pets with food allergies
- Allergen-specific immunotherapy, which essentially trains a pet's immune system to tolerate—rather than react to—specific allergens
- Regular bathing to soothe the skin and reduce allergens on the coat

Keeping your pet's environment clean and allergen-free can help improve their comfort. This may include:

- Limiting exposure to known triggers
- Using environmental flea control products to eliminate flea infestations
- Providing clean, hypoallergenic bedding
- Reducing dust indoors
- Managing indoor mold

Regular veterinary checkups are important to monitor your pet's progress and adjust treatment if needed. For severe or persistent cases, your veterinarian may recommend referral to a veterinary dermatologist. These specialists can partner with you and your veterinarian in your pet's care by offering additional insights and treatment options. If immunotherapy is planned, they can perform the intradermal or serum allergy testing needed to identify the specific allergens bothering your pet.