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Allergic Skin Disease in Cats

The signs of allergic skin disease in cats may be very similar irrespective of the cause of the allergy. In the UK, flea allergy is by far the most common allergic skin disease but can be hard to confirm as often the cat will have excessively groomed to remove the fleas. Cats may also suffer from a number of other allergic skin diseases such as food allergy or an allergy to something in their environment.

Skin problems in cats can be hard to diagnose and take time and effort to treat. You may be asked to provide regular updates of your cat's progress. There are several approaches to dealing with skin problems that can vary with the individual veterinary surgeon. Tests may include coat brushings, skin biopsies, blood tests and occasionally intradermal skin testing at a referral centre.

Symptoms can include:

- Patchy hair loss over the trunk of the cat.
- Crusted spots, especially on the back of the cat.
- Symmetrical hair losses over the back half of the trunk near the tail end, the back or sides of the thighs, underneath on the belly or inner thighs. In bad cases it can extend over most of the cat.
- Broken or stubbly fur, especially near the tail end of the cat.
- Very itchy and sometimes reddened ulcerated patches.



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- cats can exhibit frantic licking or nibbling but can be 'closet groomers' where the owner notices nothing.
- The profile of allergic cats usually includes cats that are very attached to their owners, and who may be nervous of other people or unusual situations. They are often meticulously clean cats that keep themselves immaculate.
- Cats may groom for comfort or as a habit that has got out of control – i.e. there is a psychological component too.

Flea Allergic Dermatitis

The majority of cats seen with allergic symptoms are either totally or in part due to flea allergy. This means that it is always worth eliminating this suspect first as in the majority of cases it cures or at least improves the symptoms. However, it can be hard to demonstrate that your cat is flea allergic.

Some will have flea faeces (black flea dirt) in the coat, but this is not necessarily so in the more severe cases.

In the severe cases, the cat can groom so meticulously that they will swallow any flea that hops onto them and thus not have flea faeces in their coat. Their skin may react to only one flea. Thus, a cat which is very itchy but whose coat looks clean may still have a flea problem!

NB – cats can be flea allergic even if you are already defleaing them. This may be because they are not on prescription products



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specifically for flea allergy, the products are not being used correctly or not on all animals in the household.

In the severe cases we can often only prove that they are flea allergic by doing a 'flea trial', using a prescription product for a minimum of 3 months.

We advise using a prescription flea product on all animals in the house for the trial period. Grooming evidence should decline within 1 month and fur regrowth should show after 2 months. The animals should also be wormed with a prescription wormer as fleas can act as an intermediate host for tapeworms.

Flea treatment can be given as drops on the back of the neck or a prescription tablet. Generally, for flea allergic animals, the tablet is more effective as it kills the fleas more quickly and does not irritate the skin. Prescription flea collars can be effective, it is best to discuss the best regime for your cat with your vet.

Food Allergy

This is a less common skin disease but in contrast to popular belief, can occur in cats that have been fed the same foods for years. Symptoms can range from mild to severe and diarrhoea may not be present in all cases. Intense itching of the facial area is a common manifestation of food allergy. Some foods are more likely to be a problem than others e.g. beef and cow's milk. Commercially there are several dry diets that are hypoallergenic. There are also prescription wet and dry hypoallergenic diets available from your vet.



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If your vet suspects a food allergy, then the best way to investigate is a food trial. During this period your cat will be fed a hypoallergenic diet with water to drink and must have access to nothing else to eat. This trial is recommended for at least 6 weeks.

Environmental Allergy

Feline atopy is the most common hypersensitivity disorder seen in the cat, after flea bite hypersensitivity. Cats develop antibodies to allergens in the environment, this can occur through direct skin contact or inhaled allergens. In some cases, it is not possible to determine exactly what the cat is reacting to. Common triggers are dust mites, food storage mites and certain plants. A blood test can be carried out to try and identify the high levels of antibody produced from this allergy.

If the environmental trigger can be deduced from the blood test it may be possible to help reduce the irritation. For example, a cat with dust mite allergy will suffer less if carpets are vacuumed and cleaned once a week, the house is regularly swept and dusted and the bedding is washed weekly.

Common Treatments

These can include a variety of drugs. Feedback to your vet is important as often several options have to be used before the ideal combination is reached for your pet.

- Flea treatment



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- Antibiotics
- Steroids
- Supplements e.g. essential fatty acids to help the skin barrier (care as some shop ones may be harmful in cats)
- Hypoallergenic diets
- Topical treatments
- Pheromone sprays and plug-ins
- Allergen avoidance if possible
- Cyclosporine (Atopica) - a new liquid preparation has now been licensed for cats

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