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Food Allergies & Intolerances in Dogs

Just like people, dogs can react to certain ingredients in their food. These reactions are often caused by proteins (such as beef, chicken, dairy, or soy) but sometimes involve carbohydrates or additives.

Common Symptoms

Dogs with food allergies or intolerances may show:

- **Skin problems:** Persistent itching, redness, rashes, hair loss, recurrent ear infections.
- **Digestive problems:** Vomiting, diarrhoea, soft or frequent stools [passing faeces multiple times on a walk, +- getting progressively softer each time], flatulence, bloating, known to have a 'sensitive tummy'.
- **Other signs:** Chronic anal gland issues, restlessness due to itching, poor coat quality.

What Might My Vet Do?

Because skin and stomach problems can have many causes, your vet may recommend tests which can include:

- **Physical examination** – checking the skin, ears, coat, and overall condition.
- **Skin investigation** – to rule out parasites or skin infections as a cause of itching



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- **Blood tests** – to look for underlying health problems affecting digestion or skin.
- **Faecal tests** – to check for intestinal parasites.
- **Diet history review** – a detailed look at everything your dog eats, including treats and table scraps.
- **Abdominal ultrasound** – to look for underlying health problems affecting digestion

If these issues are ongoing and not explained by parasites, infections, or environmental allergies, food may be the culprit. If the vet is suspicious of a food allergy or intolerance, they will recommend an **elimination diet trial** using a **hydrolysed diet**.

What is a Hydrolysed Diet?

A hydrolysed diet is a special type of food where the protein has been broken down (“hydrolysed”) into very small pieces. These fragments are so small that the immune system usually doesn’t recognise them as allergens, reducing the risk of a reaction. It is complete & balanced so provides all essential nutrients and is gentle on the stomach and intestines.

Testing each new protein source individually can take **months or even years**, because each trial needs at least 6–8 weeks to judge improvement.

A hydrolysed diet is quicker because:

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- **Proteins are broken down** into tiny fragments that the immune system usually doesn't recognise, so the risk of a reaction is much lower.
- Instead of guessing which protein is safe, it provides an “**all-in-one**” **option** that bypasses most common food allergens.
- It allows vets and owners to see whether food is the problem **much faster** than trialling many different diets one at a time.

Hydrolysed diets can also help if your dog has conditions where the gut needs gentle, easily digestible nutrition or has recently suffered severe gastroenteritis.

Hydrolysed diets currently available are:

- Royal Canin Hypoallergenic – dry or wet
- Royal Canin Anallergenic – dry
- Purina ProPlan HA – dry or wet
- Hills z/d – dry or wet

Hydrolysed treats available are;

- Royal Canin Hypoallergenic
- Hills z/d

Hydrolysed Diets vs Hypoallergenic Diets



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There are lots of hypoallergenic diets on the market but it is important to differentiate hydrolysed diets from hypoallergenic diets.

- **Hydrolysed Diets**

- The proteins (e.g., chicken, soy) are broken down into tiny fragments through a process called *hydrolysis*.
- These fragments are so small that the dog's immune system usually does not recognise them as allergens.
- Used both for **diagnosis (elimination diet trials)** and long-term management of food allergies.
- Very reliable for ruling out food allergies because the chance of a reaction is minimal.
- During production, machinery is deep-cleaned to avoid cross-contamination

- **Hypoallergenic Diets**

- Contain **novel protein sources** (e.g., venison, duck, insect, or fish) that the dog has not eaten before, along with limited ingredients to reduce exposure.
- These rely on the fact that the dog is unlikely to have developed an allergy to that particular protein yet.
- Sometimes used for food trials, but less reliable than hydrolysed diets because cross-reactions or hidden ingredients can still cause issues.
- No deep-cleaning during production which leads to potential cross-contamination to occur. Studies have shown 50-80% hypoallergenic or 'novel protein' diets



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were contaminated or mislabelled which can lead to ongoing symptoms, wasted time and cost, and may falsely imply that food is not the problem

☞ In short using a **hydrolysed diet** is more reliable to test for food allergy and intolerances.

How to Perform an Elimination Diet - Important Points

Strict feeding is essential: No treats, dental chews, table scraps, flavoured medicines, or access to other pets' food. Even tiny amounts of other proteins can interfere.

- **Trial period:** Usually fed for **6–8 weeks** before assessing improvement.
- **Transition:** Introduce gradually over 5–7 days to avoid stomach upset.
- **Patience:** Some dogs take several weeks to respond.
- **Prescription only:** Rarely available from pet shops, available from vets or specific online websites.

FAQs

Q: Will my dog need this diet forever?



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- Not always. If your dog improves, your vet may reintroduce other foods one by one to identify the problem ingredient. Some dogs remain on the hydrolysed diet long term.

Q: Can I give treats or extras?

- Only vet-approved treats that are hydrolysed or allergy-safe.

Q: Does it taste good?

- Most dogs enjoy it, though fussier eaters may need encouragement.

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