

FOOD ELIMINATION TRAIL

Food allergies may occur in animals as a reaction to any ingredient in the diet routinely fed, a treat or even a flavored medication. This most often is a protein component (ie. beef, chicken, fish, egg, soy etc.), or less likely a carbohydrate (ie. corn, wheat etc.). Rarely are additives or preservatives involved. The onset of the problem is usually not related to any diet change, as most animals have been eating the offending food for 2 or more years. The problem can start at any age including very young animals (several months of age) and much older, geriatric pets.

The most common sign is itching. This is seen as foot licking, leg chewing, face rubbing, armpit, belly and groin licking, as well as scooting. Cats will often exhibit intense scratching at the head and neck as well as excessive grooming. Inflammation and redness of the skin may occur. Head shaking and ear infections are also common. Food allergy may cause gastrointestinal signs such as vomiting and diarrhea, as well as flatulence and increased frequency of defecation. Clinical signs associated with food allergy persist as long as the aggravating food item is present.

There is no quick and simple test available to diagnose food allergy. Tests conducted on blood, saliva, hair, and skin are not useful in diagnosing food allergy. The only method to identify food allergy is to feed the pet a restricted diet for 8-10 weeks to determine if there is improvement of clinical signs. If there are any secondary infections present (bacteria/yeast), these need to be treated during the diet trial.

Since most commercial diets contain similar types of ingredients and multiple protein sources, simply changing the brand of food is unlikely to help. A diet that contains a protein source that the pet has NEVER eaten, also called a novel protein diet, must be fed exclusively for 8-10 weeks. Other diets that may be used in the diagnosis of food allergy include hydrolyzed protein diets where the protein is broken down into molecules too small to trigger an allergic response. A small percentage of food allergic animals may remain undiagnosed with a commercially prepared diet and the food trial may need to be repeated with a different diet or a home-cooked diet. Over-the-counter diets are not recommended due to proven cross contamination and the presence of other ingredients that may not be listed on the label and be a problem for your pet.

These diets are called hypoallergenic diets, because an allergic reaction should not occur with a food that the animal has never eaten - novel or hydrolyzed. It may require the full 8-10 weeks for the diet to work and alleviate the clinical signs, however many patients improve after several weeks. No other foods, treats, table scraps, rawhides, chewable medications, or anything that is flavored may be fed during the trial, unless otherwise directed. Diets should be introduced gradually over 5-7 days, mixing the new food in with the former diet - this will minimize the chance of gastrointestinal upset (such as vomiting or loose stool). Once the diet is being fed as the only food source, this is considered Day 1 of the 8-10 week trial.

If there has been slight to no improvement after the 8-10 week trial, the pet has eaten nothing but this diet, and all the infections that have been present during the trial have been concurrently treated, then there is most likely another underlying cause of the skin problem, such as environmental allergy (atopic dermatitis). If sustained improvement is documented, including at least a 50% reduction in itch, a structured food challenge will be performed that involves re-introducing the previous diet and treats as directed by a dermatologist. Please schedule a recheck appointment at the conclusion of the dietary trial to be sure your pet is free of skin and ear infections before beginning the food challenge or changing the diet.

This diet is a diagnostic test and your pet will only be on it for a short period of time. The goal of performing this trial is to find a commercially prepared diet that your dog or cat can tolerate. Please be patient and follow the instructions closely. The end result of the trial will provide valuable information that we may use to make your pet more comfortable.

The following points are key to the success of this diagnostic protocol:

- 🔗 Feed your pet only the prescribed diet. No other foods or treats are allowed.
- 🔗 Make sure all family members and friends know that your pet is receiving a special diet, and not to give outside food.
- 🔗 If you need to use treats for rewards or training purposes, use some of the prescribed diet or ask your pet's dermatologist for recommendations (often apples, bananas, or sweet potatoes are ok!)
- 🔗 If you have other pets of the same species in your house, feed them the same diet or feed them separately
- 🔗 Keep your pet out of the room during meals to avoid him or her picking up dropped food.
- 🔗 If pills are prescribed for your pet, don't hide them in anything other than the prescribed diet - no cheese, peanut butter etc. If giving medication is a problem, please discuss this with your veterinarian.
- 🔗 Flavored products, such as those found in medications, toothpaste, and certain plastic toys, must be avoided during the diet trial.
- 🔗 If your pet is in the habit of eating dropped food, garbage or feces when exercised outside, keep him/her on a leash or consider using a basket muzzle.

In order to avoid a digestive upset, please make the diet change from the current diet to the new diet gradually over a week, according to the chart and diagram below.