

FOOD ALLERGY HANDOUT

What causes food allergy?

A food allergy is a reaction by an individual animal's immune system to a particular food substance.

The most common causes of food allergy are caused by proteins (eg beef, mutton, chicken), wheat, corn, soy, dairy foods and eggs. It can also be to chemicals such as preservatives, additives or food dyes.

An animal develops an allergy to a food that it has been receiving for a prolonged period of time (eg not after a diet change). This is because it takes a significant amount of time for the immune system to build up an allergy to a substance.

What are the signs of food allergy?

The most common clinical sign of food allergy is skin itching. This leads to chewing, rubbing and scratching, with hair loss, redness and skin infections. Ear problems are very common (eh head shaking, smelly red ears, recurrent ear infections). Some (but not all) animals may have gastro signs like vomiting or diarrhoea.

How is it diagnosed?

Unfortunately skin testing and blood testing available for the diagnosis of food allergy in humans are not useful for the diagnosis of food allergy in the dog and cat. The diagnosis is made by conducting an elimination diet trial. This involves feeding a “novel” source of protein & carbohydrate – which means foods that your pet has NOT ever received before. This diet is fed STRICTLY for a period of six to eight weeks.

Examples (depending on what your individual pet has been fed previously) may include:

Meats (protein source): kangaroo, venison, camel, goat, horse, ostrich, donkey, buffalo, crocodile. These can be fed raw or cooked.

Carbohydrates: sweet potato, pumpkin, kidney beans, barley, lentils, tapioca.

Treats can include carrots, broccoli, apple

Do NOT feed pasta, rice, dog biscuits, human food or scraps, treats, bones, rawhides, human vitamin supplements, milk (only give WATER)

There are some prescription diets that your vet can dispense, instead of you doing a “home prep” diet. These are specialized “hydrolyzed” biscuits and wet food that have

been altered in the laboratory so the immune system does not “recognize” the food components). Examples include Royal Canine Hypoallergenic and Hills Z/D Ultra.

Please also note that heartworm tablets and other medications contain meat flavourings and we recommend these are discontinued for the length of the dietary trial. To provide heartworm protection for your pet during the elimination diet an unflavoured heartworm preventive tablet will be substituted.

Approximate guidelines for feeding home cooked diets:

Weight	Protein source	Carbohydrate source	Total
5kg	130g	270g	400g
10kg	200g	400g	600g
15kg	260g	540g	800g
20kg	400g	800g	1200g
30kg	520g	1080g	1600g
50kg	830g	1670g	2500g
70kg	1200g	2300g	3500

Keep records:

It is important that you record any differences in your pet whilst being fed the special diet. Any decrease in chewing, scratching or rubbing or any visible change in your pet’s skin should be recorded. We will try to get you to “ITCH SCORE” you pet before & during the food trial.

Assessment: the re-challenge

At the end of this trial we will ask you to feed your pet their original diet for 7 days -

making sure you include all items you were previously feeding your dog or cat. We are looking for a relapse of signs (itch, head shaking, red or irritated skin etc).

IMPORTANT NOTE: Some animals have MORE THAN ONE class of allergy – meaning they might have a food allergy AS WELL AS another type of allergy (for example environmental allergies, called 'atopy'). Itchy skin disease in our dogs and cats is not always straightforward, and a food trial to explore the possibility of your pet having a food allergy is often just ONE step in a diagnostic pathway.