**Gettin’ the Itch**

Does your pet keep you up at night licking and scratching? Have you ever yelled at your pet for scratching, hearing the jingles of the collar, seeing the hair flying off into the air? This is Shelby with Antrim Veterinary Hospital to talk about allergies. Allergies are a hypersensitivity of the immune system to a substance which is called an allergen. Most allergens are proteins of either insect, plant, or animal origin and the most common are pollens, mold spores, dust mites, and flea saliva. Although these are the most common culprits there are several different types of allergies with the most common allergies for our pets being flea allergy dermatitis, atopy, contact dermatitis, and food allergy. When the body has a reaction to the allergen it produces histamines that cause inflammation. This inflammation can manifest as redness, swelling, or more commonly itching.

One of the most common allergies in pets is atopy which is a genetically programmed allergic skin disease most commonly due to environmental allergens, typically pollen. Most pets with this allergy begin to show signs between 1 to 3 years of age although they can occur at any time. The main causes of atopy are tree pollens, such as cedar, ash, and oak; grass, weeds, molds, mildew, and house dust mites. Many of these pollens occur seasonally but your pet can have year-round issues if they react to more than one allergen. The most common reaction to these allergens is itchy skin. Signs of itching in animals may include rubbing their face, licking their feet, or scratching anywhere, but especially their armpits or ears, chewing the skin or scooting their rear. To diagnose what your pet is allergic to allergy testing can be performed to identify the allergen. Treatments include shampooing to remove the allergens and to protect the skin against the allergens as well as sprays, wipes, and mousses. These can be antibacterial, or contain antihistamines, or topical anesthetics to help control secondary infections and decrease inflammation. Some pets can be treated by hypo sensitization therapy or “allergy shots.” First the pet will be tested for reactions to common allergens. Then a serum will be made with very small amounts of these molecules with the goal of desensitizing the immune system. They can be administered as shots or a liquid that is placed under the tongue.

Another common allergy in pets is to flea saliva. Although most pets show only minor irritation from a flea bite, a flea allergic dog or cat can have severe itching for up to 2 weeks from a single bite. The pet will try to relieve the itch by biting and scratching which, if intense enough, will cause hair loss especially at the tail base in a triangular pattern. Continued trauma to the skin may cause secondary bacterial infections which can lead to intensified itching. If this occurs appropriate antibiotics will be prescribed. Antihistamines or corticosteroids may also be used to help ease itching. With chronic licking saliva can cause an orange or reddish-brown staining of the hair. The primary treatment is strict flea control year-round. Even a small break in your monthly regimen can allow fleas to quickly reach staggering numbers.

The third most common type of allergy is food allergy. This allergy can develop at any age and to any food but most commonly to a protein. Pets are not born with food allergies but develop the allergy to food products they have eaten. Beef and dairy make up 80% of all food allergies with other common ingredients being chicken, corn, wheat, and fish. Because of its inclusion a lot of dog foods, lamb is now becoming a more common food allergy. Symptoms of food allergy include itching, vomiting, and diarrhea. Food allergies can be seen in conjunction with other allergies, most commonly atopy. The only way to confirm a food allergy in your pet is to do a food trial with a hydrolyzed or hypoallergenic diet. A hydrolyzed diet has the proteins altered so the immune system can’t recognize them as an allergen. A hypoallergenic diet uses a protein that your pet has not been exposed to before and is not found in routine diets. During this trial the pet may only have that food; no treats, table food, vitamins, bones, chewable medications or preventatives. This trial may take a minimum of 8-10 weeks before all offending allergens are out of the system and the skin has cleared. At that point it is ideal to “challenge” the pet with their old diet or individual foods to confirm that improvement is truly due to the food, not that their pollen season is over. If the trial is successful then the pet will likely stay on that diet lifelong. In order to manage food allergies, every family member must follow the guidelines given by the veterinarian.

The least common allergy is contact allergies. A contact allergy is caused by a direct contact to an allergen or more typically an irritant. The most common cases are flea collars, chemicals on the lawn, perfumed cat litter, shampoos, wool or synthetic rugs, and certain plants. If your pet has a contact allergy the skin will be irritated and often more painful then itchy at the contact site. Pets with contact allergies typically only react where the offending material is in contact with the skin, often the belly or the backs of the legs. Contact allergies are rare but easily treated by removing the source of allergy or irritation.

Allergies are common in dogs and cats of all different breeds and backgrounds. Some allergies may be inherited. Most allergies appear after 1-2 years of age, although they may occur at any age Remember, if you move or take your pet to a different city he/she may be exposed to different allergens which can set off an allergic response. Allergies can be confused with other disorders so it is important to obtain a diagnosis. Now that you know what to look for give us a call if you feel your pet may be suffering from allergies. 410-751-0091