

Focus on Health: Allergies

Allergies in dogs are one of the most frustrating health issues that owners and Veterinarians face. It can be utterly heart-breaking to watch your companion endure itchy skin, hot spots, skin ulceration, watery eyes, sneezing, ear infections, and other symptoms. The constant scratching and paw licking can literally cause a loss of sleep for both dog and owner. Unfortunately, Golden Retrievers are one of the breeds especially prone to allergies.

In Veterinary practice, the goals are to try to identify and reduce any offending allergens and to treat symptoms (usually with systemic corticosteroids such as prednisone in injection or pill form). The goal for both Veterinarian and owner is to give the smallest dose of steroid possible to reduce symptoms while addressing environmental factors in hopes of eliminating the allergies, thus eliminating the need for steroids. In this article, I will focus on how to reduce allergens in the home and on complementary and alternative therapies for allergies in dogs.

First, it is important to understand that there are three common types of allergens: food, inhalant, and contact. All allergic symptoms are caused by a hyperactive immune response to proteins in a substance.



Food Allergies

In food allergies, a pet is allergic to some component of their food. Taking a long, hard look at the quality and source of your pet's food and choosing the best quality food you can afford will not only reduce your pet's allergy symptoms, but will likely extend your dog's life and reduce illness. Good nutrition is key to a long and healthy life. In dogs, the top four common food allergens are corn, wheat, beef, and chicken. It is important to view your dog as an individual when looking at his or her diet, as your dog could be allergic uncommon allergens such as lamb, duck, or brown rice. Below are the steps to take in choosing a new food for your dog:

- ⇒ **Chose a food with a “novel” protein source:**
Novel simply means new or unique. Choose a protein source your dog has not eaten in his or her lifetime. Some of the lowest offending allergens are things such as venison, duck, bison, and lamb. Look for those and other novel meat sources on the label.
- ⇒ **Chose a food with a nutritious carbohydrate source:**
Make sure that any carbohydrate sources in the product are also of high quality (such as brown rice, sweet potatoes, and others). Avoid foods with corn or wheat ingredients. Corn in particular is of very little nutritive value and is highly allergenic.
- ⇒ **Make the switch slowly and with the intent to “stick to it”:**
When you switch to a new brand of food, do so slowly to reduce gastrointestinal upset. Be sure to stick with the new type of food for at least two to three months to see if there is an improvement in allergic symptoms. If symptoms seem to reduce on the new food after three months, you may try to introduce other novel protein foods (for instance you may have used duck based food to reduce symptoms to begin with and now want to introduce venison or bison). Variety can help in reducing the chances of allergic reactions and will give your dog a more well-rounded and nutritious diet.

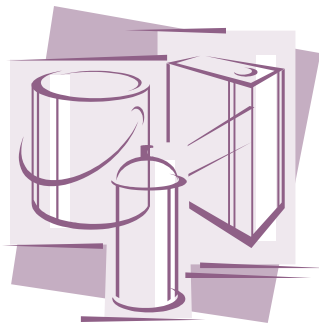
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⇒ **Do your research:**

There are a number of great pet food companies out there right now who have a commitment to your dog's health in mind when making their foods. Do searches on the net for natural pet foods and read up on food and allergies. The best choice is to purchase "super premium" products such as those by Fromm, Merrick, Natura Pet, Natural Balance, Old Mother Hubbard, Nature's Variety, Pet Guard, Amore, and others. You may even consider home-prepared diets using a commercially available "pre-mix" or a Veterinary-written recipe. If you do this, be sure to use supplementation and to really do your research to be sure that you are helping and not hurting your dog. An ill-prepared home diet can be very detrimental to your dog's health, so do your research!

Contact Allergies



Contact allergens are those substances which cause an allergic reaction when a dog's skin comes into contact with them. Contact allergens/irritants are often found in common household cleaning products, scented products such as candles and "plug-in" air fresheners, and even in the flooring materials in a home. Reducing contact allergens and irritants in your home will be a great step in the right direction for the health of your dog AND for yourself. Your whole family will also reap the benefits of a less toxic environment. Below are the steps for reducing irritants in the home:

⇒ **Clean up your house cleaning:**

Go through your cupboards and get rid of all of the synthetic and chemical cleaners you have. You can choose to donate them or just throw them out. Replace synthetic cleaners with products by eco-conscious companies such as Ecover, Seventh Generation, Lifestree, and others. These products are often made with coconut-based surfactants and essential oils. They have a pleasant scent, but do not leave a residue on surfaces or in carpets and bedding that could irritate a sensitive dog's paws or skin. The added advantage is that you will not be coming into contact with potential irritants and carcinogens either. Also look at your personal care products, as these are often full of chemicals that are unhealthy for us if used regularly over long periods of time. It is especially important to use hypoallergenic laundry detergent on your dog's bedding or clothing.

⇒ **Flea control is important:**

Some animals have allergies to fleas. Being sure to keep your dog free of fleas through regular vacuuming of the home, thorough cleaning of bedding and clothes, and regular grooming checks and proper nutrition can help to avoid the need for pesticidal treatments. If you have a severe problem with fleas, products such as Capstar and even Frontline may be a necessary option.

⇒ **Check your dog's bedding:**

Be sure that the bedding does not contain things such as down, wool, rubber or synthetic foams or cedar chips. All of these things can be allergens in certain dogs. Use only natural, plant based bedding such as cotton whenever possible.

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⇒ **Change your dog's food dishes:**

Plastics and dyes can be allergenic to dogs. The best choice is to purchase a product made for human usage (either stoneware or Pyrex glass) to reduce the chance of an allergic reaction to the paints or plastics in the dishes. Products like Pyrex also don't easily scratch and therefore have very little chance for carrying bacteria when cleaned regularly.

Inhalant Allergens

Reducing inhalant allergens may be one of the most difficult steps to undertake. Some pets, like humans have seasonal allergies to certain pollens, molds, grasses, and even to dust and dander! As with reducing contact allergens, reducing inhalant allergens in your home will help the health of your whole family. Below are some steps to take to reduce these allergens:

⇒ **Use air purifiers:**

Air purifiers used during the height of allergy season can help reduce symptoms for your dog drastically. Be sure to stay away from "ionic" or "ozone" cleaners as there is recent concern regarding the safety of these for our health. A basic HEPA filter will do nicely. There are companies whose sole focus is reduction of allergens in homes. There are even window air filters that are placed in the open window that allow you to have open windows while keeping out the amount of allergens that get into our home and which use no electricity or battery power.

⇒ **Wash your dog:**

While it is inadvisable to wash your dog every single day during allergy season, doing so regularly and more often during that time is a must. Once every 2-3 weeks may be a good choice. As with household and personal hygiene/cosmetic items, be sure to purchase an all-natural dog shampoo and be certain to rinse well so as to leave no residue. You may even be able to use an oatmeal or calendula based product on your dog to double up on the anti-itch factor. Avoid chamomile in any form as it is closely related to ragweed, which is a common allergen (this is a good tip for people with ragweed allergies as well). Some people even have their dog wear lightweight booties and a doggy T-shirt when they go out and wash that every day to reduce the allergens. Washing/rinsing of the paws daily after outside play may also be advisable.

⇒ **Keep the house as clean as possible:**

Reducing the amount of dust, dander, and other allergens in the home may also help your dog's symptoms.

CAM Solutions

The last topic I will address in this article is that of CAM options. CAM stands for "Complementary and Alternative Medicine". These modes of care are becoming increasingly popular in human and animal medicine. Suggestions that I found were:

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⇒ **Add Omega-3 Fatty Acids and Vitamin E to the Diet:**

This can be done in the form of either fish body oil capsules or flaxseed oil depending on the dog's needs. Flax seed oil should be used in dogs allergic to fish. Be sure when buying a fish product that does rigorous testing for contaminants such as mercury (one such brand is Nordic Naturals). Omega-3 and vitamin E are both said to be anti-inflammatory and Omega-3 works best with vitamin E due to its antioxidant properties.

⇒ **Homeopathy:**

Homeopathy is a mode of treating disease by administration of minute doses of a substance (usually plant materials) that in massive amounts produces symptoms in healthy individuals similar to those of the disease itself. This is somewhat confusing, but many pet owners swear by them. You may find a Veterinarian who specializes in homeopathy by using www.ahvma.org. Dr. Goodpet is one company that makes a number of homeopathic allergy products. They make one for the eyes, one for the ears, one for the skin, and one specifically for flea issues. They are easily obtained either online or through Outpost Foods in Milwaukee.

⇒ **Topical care of raw spots:**

Calendula ointment is the number one CAM treatment for hotspots and superficial wounds or scrapes due to a dog's overzealous licking or scratching. Calendula has anti-inflammatory and anti-microbial properties. This is another product easily found at Outpost Foods and other health stores.

⇒ **Glandulars:**

Glandulars are somewhat controversial, but there has been some scientific evidence to back them up. Basically, what you do is give a product made from the tissues of other animals that mirror the problem areas in your pet. (Heart tissue for heart trouble, kidney tissue for kidney trouble, etc.) Standard Process of Wisconsin makes a number of human and pet glandular products. One holistic Veterinarian, Dr. Martin Goldstein in his book **The Nature of Animal Healing**, states that he believes giving adrenal support can help the pet to produce their own natural cortisone, thus lessening or eliminating the need for synthetic corticosteroid shots. He suggests using Standard Process's product Drenatrophin, which is powdered animal adrenal gland.

⇒ **Chiropractic:**

Chiropractic care is not just for bad backs. Misaligned vertebrae cause nerve interference which can cause symptoms of illness by causing incorrect messages in the CNS. A Chiropractic manual adjustment can remove the nerve interference and thus reduce symptoms of illness. Allergies are generally connected to a misalignment in the cervical (neck) vertebrae. Only have your dog adjusted by a Chiropractor or Veterinarian who has been certified in Chiropractic care through the AVCMA. <http://www.animalchiropractic.org/>

⇒ **Other things:**

Whole Dog Journal recently discussed two products in regard to allergy help. One was coconut oil, and the other was a German product called Wobenzyme. You may wish to look into CAM magazines and books that are written by Veterinarians to learn more about CAM therapies for all types of pet illness and disease.

It is important to know that there are many things you can do to try to alleviate your canine companion's allergies. I hope that this article was informative and will help your dog on a path to less itching and more comfort!