

Aireworth Vets   
SMALL ANIMAL

## ALLERGIES & ITCHY DOGS



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If you have any further queries regarding the welfare of your pet, please do not hesitate to ask a member of staff

We are happy to assist!

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## What are allergies, and how do they affect dogs?

One of the most common conditions affecting dogs is allergy. There are three common allergies, flea allergy, food allergy and inhalant allergy. In the allergic state, the dog's immune system "overreacts" to foreign substances (allergens or antigens) to which it is exposed. These overreactions are manifested in three ways.

The most common is itching of the skin, either localised (one area) or generalised (all over the dog); the dog will chew, lick, or scratch almost any area of the body, including the feet. Chewing and scratching produce hair loss and inflamed areas of the skin. Saliva will stain light coloured hair, so dogs that lick excessively will have orange or reddish brown hair; this is often seen on the feet.

Another manifestation involves the respiratory system and may result in coughing, sneezing, and/or wheezing. Sometimes, there may be an associated nasal or ocular (eye) discharge. The third manifestation involves the digestive system, resulting in vomiting or diarrhoea. The specific response that occurs is related to the allergen and the individual animal's immune system.

### What is causing my dog's allergy?

That is not a question that can be answered easily. The itching produced by grass pollen is the same as that produced by oak pollen allergy. In other words, an individual animal can be allergic to many different things with the end result (itching) being the same. In some cases, allergy testing can make specific determinations, and sometimes an educated guess can be accurate if the itching corresponds with the blooming season of certain plants.

## What is meant by "seasonal" and "year round allergy"?

As the names imply, some dogs only have allergic reactions during specific periods of the year, others will itch year round. A year round allergy occurs for two reasons. First, the allergen is present year round, as is the case for indoor dogs that are allergic to house dust mites. Second, the dog is allergic to so many things that at least one of those allergens is present at all times. As the dog ages, it usually becomes allergic to more and more things. After several years of acquiring new allergies, it reaches the point that it is constantly exposed to something to which it is allergic. So often what starts as a seasonal allergy may become a year round problem.

### My dog has a terrible odour- Is that related?

There are two possible causes of odour associated with allergies. Allergic dogs are very prone to ear infections because the ear canal is an extension of the skin. When it becomes inflamed, it is easily infected and this will smell. The dog is also likely to have seborrhea: sebum is the oily material normally produced in the skin, when a dog scratches, sebum production increases dramatically, producing a musty odour. A bath will remove the odour, but it is gone for only a few hours. The key to controlling seborrhoea is to stop the itching and scratching. In addition the sebum is a good medium in which bacteria can grow, leading to infection. This again results in an unpleasant smell.



## What is food allergy?

A food allergy is a condition in which the body's immune system reacts adversely to a food or an ingredient in a food. Dogs are not likely to be born with food allergies. More commonly, they develop allergies to food products they have eaten for a long time. Any food or food ingredient can cause an allergy. However, protein is the most likely offender. The most common allergies are to chicken and dairy products. Food allergy may produce any of the clinical signs previously discussed, including itching, digestive disorders, and respiratory distress.

### What is meant by the term flea allergy?

In spite of common belief, a normal dog experiences only minor skin irritation in response to flea bites. Even in the presence of dozens of fleas, there will be very little itching. On the other hand, the flea allergic dog has a severe, itch-producing reaction to flea bites. This occurs because the dog develops an allergic response to the flea's saliva. When the dog is bitten, flea saliva is deposited in the skin. Just one bite causes intense itching and this is of a long lasting nature.

### What does this reaction do to the dog?

The dog's response to the intense itching is to chew, lick, or scratch. This causes hair loss and can lead to open sores or scabs on the skin, allowing a secondary bacterial infection to begin. The area most commonly involved is over the rump (just in front of the tail). This is probably because fleas find this part of the dog more desirable. Many flea-allergic dogs also chew or lick the hair off their legs and belly.

For details on how to treat your dogs allergies please book an appointment with your vet today.