

Atopic Dermatitis (or Atopy) Page 1

Atopic dermatitis or atopy is the most common skin disease we see in dermatology and is equivalent to eczema in people. Animals can be allergic to pollens, dust mites, mould spores and insects just like people can.

At MVSC, we perform intradermal skin allergy testing (similar to skin prick testing in humans) and sometimes we use blood allergy testing (Heska allercept test) to identify what the patient is allergic to. If avoidance is not possible, then desensitisation with an allergy vaccine is usually recommended to help manage the allergies better long term. An allergy vaccine can be formulated based on the results of the skin allergy testing. This allows for minimal medication and sometimes even eliminates the need for medication and the side effects that can be caused.

When should you suspect your dog has atopic dermatitis?

You should be suspicious that your dog has atopic dermatitis if any of the symptoms below fits your dog.

- If your dog is a purebred or crossed with a breed where atopic dermatitis is common (see list breed list below)
- If the disease started prior to 4 years of age (may be mild early on)
- If the disease started or is worse in warm weather
- If your dog has persistent or recurrent itch and/or skin and ear infections.
- If the itch affects the feet, face, ears, bottom, legs or areas that contact the ground when the dog lies down
- If your dog gets ear or skin infections
- If your dog becomes itchy after contacting grass
- If your dog gets itchy after being washed
- If your dog has persistently greasy skin
- If your dog becomes “smelly” within days of being washed

What you should do if you suspect you dog has atopic dermatitis?

If you suspect your dog has atopic dermatitis then you should discuss with your regular veterinarian as to whether your dog may have allergies and thus benefit from a referral to a specialist veterinary dermatologist. A specialist dermatologist spends years of training to know how to diagnose, manage and prevent relapses of ear and skin allergy problems. It is the frequent relapses of problems that lead to rising veterinary costs and discomfort for your pet. To help provide your pet with a better quality of life a specialist dermatologist will address all of these issues to form a specific management plan suitable for you and your pet.

The first step to successful management is a correct diagnosis. This is best done by a specialist dermatologist to confirm the diagnosis of atopic dermatitis. If atopic dermatitis is confirmed, the dermatologist will then assess the contribution of an allergy, barrier dysfunction and/or infection in your pet. Management options will be discussed that address all components of the disease.

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How do we treat atopy?

Generally the best treatment for the allergic component of atopy is immunotherapy (desensitisation) or avoidance of the triggers specific to the animal. Immunotherapy is the only specific treatment for allergies, thereby minimising or eliminating the need for medications. It specifically targets the allergy cells, making the patient less allergic and leaves the rest of the immune system to do what it is meant to do and that is protect us from infections and cancers etc.

In order to form a vaccine for your pet, it requires accurate identification of what your pet is allergic to. There are two tests that we consider helpful for identifying allergens (intradermal skin testing and Heska Allercept blood testing). There is evidence to suggest that using the results of both intradermal skin and blood tests can give a more accurate allergy profile for your pet and thus a better outcome on immunotherapy. Once we have identified what your pet is allergic to, we can then formulate an allergy vaccine (immunotherapy) which will contain the allergens that your pet has reacted to. As the vaccine begins to work, there will be fewer allergic signs (such as infections and itching) therefore not needing as much medication to keep your pet comfortable.

What should you expect from vaccine?

Most animals will start to improve within approximately 2 to 5 months after the vaccine begins. During the first 2 months your pet will still be reliant on medication other than the vaccine to control the allergy. After 2 months, the vaccine dose is built up to a full maintenance dose and this is when we expect things to start improving with the hope of continual improvement over the following 12 months. This also means that we would expect there to be a gradual reduction in the level of medications needed as the vaccine takes over.

What is the cost of immunotherapy?

Costs vary depending on how many things your pet is allergic to. A vaccine that will usually last 6 to 12 months (depending on frequency of the injections) will cost usually between \$90 and \$650 (average about \$300). After the results of the intradermal skin test and/or the heska allercept blood test are received we will be able to provide you with an accurate estimate of costs. In many cases, immunotherapy is the most cost-effective therapy for this disease as there is a reduced need for medication, fewer visits for treating ear and skin infections therefore leaving your pet with a better quality of life.

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Where does your local clinic fit in?

Your local clinic is very important to the success of immunotherapy. It is important that they are involved in the process so that there is no loss in continuity of the treatment. We forward a full report to your local clinic after EVERY visit and also any important telephone communications that we may have with you. We would request that if you are seeing your local clinic for a skin related issue that they send us a summary of the visit so we can update our records.

Common breeds we see with allergies

As mentioned previously, in dogs there are a number of breeds that are recognised as being high risk breeds for atopic dermatitis. The strong breed association with atopic dermatitis suggests that genetic factors are involved. Dogs generally do not “grow out” of atopic dermatitis and will generally need some type of management for life. See below for the most common breeds we see with Atopic Dermatitis.

Our Top ten:

- Labrador Retriever
- Golden Retriever
- Staffordshire Bull Terrier
- Jack Russell Terrier
- West Highland White Terrier
- Bichon Frise
- Boxer
- German Shepherd
- Beagle

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Other common breeds we see with allergies include:

Australian Cattle Dog	Irish Setter
Australian Kelpie	Irish Wolfhound
Australian Silky Terrier	Keeshond
Australian Terrier	Lhasa Apso
Akita	Maltese
Alaskan Malamute	Mastiff
Border Collie	Newfoundland
Bulldog	Rhodesian Ridgeback
Bull Terrier	Rottweiler
Cairn Terrier	Schnauzer
Cavalier King Charles Spaniel	Shar pei
Chihuahua	Shiba Inu
Chow Chow	Shetland Sheepdog
Cocker Spaniel	Shih Tzu
Dachshund	Siberian husky
Dalmatian	Weimaraner
Doberman	Welsh corgi
English Springer Spaniel	
German Shorthaired Pointer	
Great Dane	
Hungarian Vizsla	