

FLEA ALLERGY IN CATS

What are allergies, and how do they affect cats?

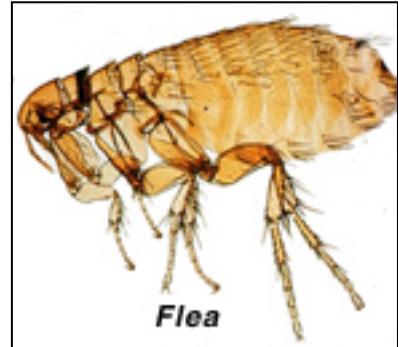
One of the most common conditions affecting cats is allergic dermatitis or skin allergies. In the allergic state, the cat's immune system "overreacts" to foreign substances called *allergens* or *antigens*. These overreactions are manifested in several ways. The most common is itching of the skin, either localized in one area or generalized itching all over the cat. Another manifestation involves the respiratory system and may result in coughing, sneezing, and wheezing. Sometimes, there may be an associated nasal or ocular (eye) discharge. The third manifestation involves the digestive system, resulting in vomiting or diarrhea. The specific response that occurs is related to the type of allergy present.

Does that mean that there are several types of allergies?

There are five known types of allergies in the cat: contact, flea, food, bacterial, and inhalant. Each of these has some common expressions in cats, and each has some unique features.

What is meant by the term "flea allergy"?

In spite of common belief, a normal cat 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 cat with flea allergies has a severe, reaction to flea bites. This occurs because the cat develops an allergic response to the flea's saliva. When the cat is bitten, flea saliva is deposited in the skin. Just one bite causes intense itching.



What does this reaction do to the cat?

The cat'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 cat more desirable. Many flea-allergic cats also chew or lick the hair off of their legs. Itching and hair loss around the tail base, neck and head should be considered suspicious for flea allergy dermatitis.

What is the treatment for flea allergy dermatitis?

The most important treatment for flea allergy is to control and prevent flea bites. Strict flea control is the backbone of successful treatment. There are many products available for flea control, and many work in entirely different manners. In some cases, multiple products may be needed. Some are used on the cat and some in the cat's environment. Fortunately, with today's modern and highly efficacious flea preventives, flea control is achievable by all cat owners.

Some cats can be desensitized to the adverse effects of flea bites. Flea saliva extract (flea antigen) is injected into the cat in tiny amounts over a prolonged period of time. This is an attempt to reprogram the cat's immune system so it no longer over-reacts to flea bites. If successful, itching no longer occurs or is less intense when the cat is bitten. This approach is successful approximately 50-75% of the time.



Corticosteroids ("cortisone" or "steroids") can be used to block the allergic reaction and give immediate relief. This is often a necessary part of dealing with flea allergy. Some cats respond best to long-acting injections and others to oral medication. Cats are much more resistant to the negative side-effects of steroids than humans and dogs, but significant side-effects can occur if they are not used properly. For this reason, the goal is to administer the smallest amount of steroid needed to keep the cat comfortable. Some cats develop a secondary bacterial infection in the skin. When this occurs, appropriate antibiotics must be used.

INSTRUCTIONS

Those instructions that are specific for your cat have been checked

An injection of steroids was given. Relief should be apparent within twelve to twenty-four hours. If not, please call. Your cat should feel better and itch less for about one month. It is important

that you immediately institute appropriate measures of strict flea control.

If an increase in water consumption or urination occurs, please report this to us for future reference. These side-effects are common with steroid administration and will go away in a few days without treatment. They may be avoided in the future by giving a lower dose. Return for further evaluation when the first signs of itching recur.

Begin oral steroids when the first signs of itching return. Give ____ tablets every other morning. Adjust the dosage upward or downward to the lowest effective dose, with a maximum dose of _____ permitted. Stop giving the medication every four to six months to see if there are times of the year when therapy is not needed. Report any increase in water consumption to us at once.

We have dispensed oral steroid tablets. Prednisone is most commonly used. The specific drug being dispensed for your cat is labeled on the bottle. Give ____ of the ____ mg tablets every other day for three doses (six days), then ____ tablets every other day for three more doses (six more days). Continue this tapering dose (_____) until the first signs of itching recur. At that time, go back to the next higher level and report that level to us (so we can be sure it is a safe level).

Stop giving the tablets every four to six months to see if there are periods of the year when they are not necessary. If the itching returns, begin immediately at the maintenance dose. If that does not stop the itching, increase the dosage slightly (to a maximum of ____ tablets) for a few doses, then return to the lower dose. Report any increase in water consumption to us at once. (This may occur at the initial dose but should stop on the maintenance dose.)

Flea control is very important and should include treating the cat and its environment. The following products are recommended for your situation:

Bear in mind that flea allergy often accompanies other types of allergy, especially inhalant allergy. If your cat itches when fleas have been eliminated, notify us of that so that we can modify the treatment approach.

Your cat has a bacterial skin infection secondary to its flea allergy. The following are recommended:

Antibiotics are to be used for the next _____ days. If the infection is not gone by the time the medication is completed, call for a refill or for a change in medication.

The medicated shampoo, _____, is to be used every _____ days. Allow the shampoo to stay in the fur for ten minutes before thoroughly rinsing the cat.

The topical medication, _____, is to be used _____ times daily for _____ days.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM
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