

Tip Sheet

Food Allergies



What are food allergies?

In pets, food allergies, also known as “adverse food reactions,” are usually caused by an abnormal immune system response to a protein in their diet. When ingested, the offending protein can then trigger the release of histamine which is responsible for the uncomfortable clinical signs you may see appear in your pet. Your veterinary team is there to help you and give you appropriate advice, to reduce the risk of allergies and keep your pet’s skin healthy.

What are the symptoms?

Food allergy is often responsible for the following symptoms:

- Itching (excessive chewing, scratching or licking)
- Redness on the skin
- Lesions and scabs on the skin
- Greater hair loss
- Chronic ear infections and/or skin infections
- Diarrhea and vomiting if the digestive system is involved

How do I know if my pet has food allergies?

Although there are blood tests marketed for the detection of food allergies, these tests are neither accurate nor reliable for selecting an appropriate food for your pet.

The only accurate test to diagnose a protein or food allergy is to perform an elimination trial (or food trial) for 8 to 12 weeks. The animal **must not receive any food other than that prescribed by the veterinarian until the end of this period**. Your veterinary team will guide you every step of the way.

What type of food might be suitable for my pet with an allergy?

1. Novel proteins:

These hypoallergenic veterinary foods contain different sources of protein that your pet has not been exposed to in a previous diet and less likely to be associated with hypersensitivity in your pet, such as duck, venison, or fish.

2. Hydrolyzed proteins:

These hypoallergenic veterinary foods use proteins whose size (molecular weight) has been reduced by an enzymatic process called hydrolysis, making them undetectable by your pet’s immune system.

3. Homemade recipe:

Homemade recipes are another possible option, but much more complex and require a lot of preparation time. These types of diets are hard to balance and often have nutrient deficiencies and overdoses that may cause considerable harm to the pet, when fed long term.

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How do hypoallergenic veterinary foods help my pet?

- Their ability to consistently improve the clinical signs of food allergies has been scientifically proven.
- They help reduce the discomfort caused by itching and improve the quality of their coat.
- They are prepared to high standards to avoid contamination with unwanted allergenic ingredients.
- The ingredients are always the same from one bag to another and from one batch to the next. They do not change according to the availability or price of food on the market. This ensures that nothing changes in your pet's controlled diet.
- It can take a long time for the skin to normalize after a food allergen is removed. A diet trial lasting eight weeks will diagnose about 95% of food allergic pets. A trial lasting four weeks will diagnose only about 50%.

Pet store foods are not an ideal choice for allergy pets, including raw diets, due to the risk of cross-contamination with other sources of allergens. This is because the manufacturers are not obliged to perform sterilization and deep cleaning of their machinery after each batch of food.

Tips and tricks

- Offer your pet only food approved by your veterinarian. Do not mix and match diets, treats or human foods as this will affect the feeding trial and nutrient balance.
- Take it slow. Don't switch to the new food overnight. It's a recipe for refusal and stomach upset. Take at least one week (or longer) to make the transition. Start the eight-week countdown on the first day you feed only the elimination diet.
- Do not give in to begging. This is probably the most difficult part.
- Reward your pet. Make the food into a treat by putting it into your pet's cookie jar or in a food dispensing toy. If your pet gets food from the kitchen counter or table, have a stash of the food at these locations. Ensure that any container used is thoroughly cleaned and only used to hold the recommended prescription diet.
- Feed animals in the house separately to avoid "stealing" food from one animal to another (or even licking food bowls).
- Isolate your pet during family meals to prevent them from picking up crumbs under the table.
- Plan ahead. Purchase the food well in advance so you do not run out.
- Let everyone know. Your pet may have an entourage: children, neighbours, dog walkers, dog daycare staff, pet store staff, and members of your family. They need to know about the diet trial.
- Diligently clean anything that could have touched another food source: toys, bowls, measuring cups, etc. and keep the diet in its original packaging to avoid contamination.
- Keep track. Keep a calendar of your pet's symptoms, medications, and food. Don't panic. If you make a mistake, just record it on the calendar and keep going with the diet trial.
- Go the distance. For the sake of your pet's health, stick with the trial for the minimum of eight weeks. Call your veterinary team with questions or to ask for help.