

Pets have allergies too! *How to help your itchy pet*

Did you know pets can suffer from seasonal allergies? While the symptoms for animals are not the same runny nose or cough that humans experience, many pet allergies manifest as skin problems—causing both pets and their owners reduced quality of life from pets' constant scratching, licking, paw chewing, and head-shaking.

Steven Koons, a recent widower in Plano, Texas, lives with two Westies whom he considers family. "Bailey" started showing skin problems when she became two years old. "Scooter" was in such pitiful condition when adopted that he needed immediate specialized care.

Operation Kindness referred the Koons to Dr. Reid Garfield, a veterinary dermatology specialist at the Animal Dermatology Referral Clinic (ADRC) in Dallas. After careful examination and diagnosis, both Bailey and Scooter were treated with allergy shots. Scooter was placed on many other medications as well for his multiple problems.

"When we first met Scooter, he had lost almost all of his hair, was itching badly, had eye and ear infections, and a weak immune system," Steven describes. "Scooter's skin was thickened, red, inflamed, and had some open sores. The only hair he had left was on top of his head—where he couldn't scratch and chew."

After a few months of treatment, Bailey's itching stopped, the quality of her coat improved, and she stopped licking the hair off her legs. Within a few months, Scooter's problems also started resolving. Today, Scooter is a normal, happy dog with a shiny coat, and shows no signs of the terrible shape he was in at the time of rescue.

"We pour a lot of emotions and caring into our dogs," Steven says. "My wife Ruth was heartbroken about the degree of suffering and illness that Scooter was experiencing. We were relieved to find a resource to help—veterinary dermatology specialists who can handle both the basic pet allergy problems like Bailey's and also pets with multiple and severe skin problems like Scooter's."



Photo of the Westie "Scooter" before treatment (October).

Seeking specialized allergy treatment

Dr. Colleen Murray, a family veterinarian at Katy Trail Animal Hospital in Dallas, says on any given day 10-20% of the patients she sees have allergy-related skin problems. In the spring and summer, that might increase to 50%.

"About 25% of the patients we see for allergies need specialized care," Dr. Murray explains. "For those cases, we talk to owners about a veterinary dermatology specialist."

Pet owners should consider veterinary dermatology specialty care when:

- The pet's symptoms do not improve much, despite initial treatments
- Regular doctor visits become too frequent or unmanageable
- The pet is on and off medication continuously
- The pet and the owner can't sleep because of the chewing and scratching
- The pet is destructive to the point of drawing blood

Allergies tend to get worse as pets get older. If pets show signs of allergies at a young age, they need specialized treatment to immediately address their symptoms.

Dick Smith and Laura Karbash-Smith of Bartonville, Texas were at wit's end with the treatment of their Dalmatians. "Maxie" started getting yeast build-up in her ears at age two and scratched her ears to the point where they would scab. Four-year-old "Shadow" had severe head-shaking and was constantly licking his flanks. It got to the point where "no one in our house, not the dogs or us, were getting any sleep at night," Dick explains.

"Laura and I decided, after four years, that enough is enough," Dick continues. "We said there's got to be something better than struggling daily with Maxie's ear drops and putting Shadow through the ordeal of regular trips to our veterinarian for treatment."

Their family veterinarian referred them to Dr. Dennis Crow, a veterinary dermatology specialist at the Animal Dermatology Referral Clinic (ADRC) in Dallas. The Smiths were thrilled.

"Maxie is not an easy dog; she doesn't get along with most people, especially doctors," Dick explains. "At her first visit, Dr. Crow got down on the floor, connected with her, and made her very comfortable. Laura and I stood there with our mouths open; we couldn't believe how Maxie took to him."

Maxie had an intradermal allergy test that revealed she was allergic to most allergens. Treatment for Maxie is an allergy serum, which the Smiths administer at home with a shot placed just under the skin.

"That process is much easier on us and Maxie than the ear treatments," Dick says. The Smiths started to see signs of Maxie's improvement within a week, with a decrease of head shaking and licking. Soon Shadow started on the serum treatments as well. "It was within a month, that we were saying to ourselves, why did we wait so long to do this?" Dick recalls.



Photo of the Westie "Scooter" after only a few months of treatment (December).

The quality of life for the Koons, the Smiths, and their pets was greatly improved after seeing veterinary dermatology specialists for their animals' allergies. Dick Smith explains, "We are empty nesters so Maxie and Shadow are our kids. We want the best for them. The ADRC was such a relief to us."

Steven Koons tells other pet owners: "If initial treatments don't resolve systems and your pet continues to lick and scratch, seek further care. Just like with humans, pets sometimes need to see a specialist."

About the Authors

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