

Is Your Cat Allergic?

You can help stop the itching, licking and biting that drives your cat crazy.

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Posted: Fri May 11 00:00:00 PDT 2001

Dr. Raclyn recommends a slow, gradual transition to a new diet; and ultra-finicky eaters should be given a choice of acceptable foods and be allowed to choose what they like best. In extreme cases, where a cat is starving itself to protest the diet change, he might prescribe an appetite stimulant, such as Periactin.

The Next Step: Testing

If food isn't the culprit, a blood allergy or skin test might determine the source. A serum allergy test costs \$150 to \$200, depending on where you live. "It's next to useless for determining food allergies, but it's very helpful in diagnosing contact or inhalant allergies," Raclyn says.

Casey Phillips, who owns Dominic, a 2-year-old Siamese, says her cat's serum allergy test yielded positive results for house dust mites, black flies, sycamore, rye grass, ragweed and honeysuckle.

Dominic's allergy specialist put him on oral steroids, as well as Periactin, which Casey believes has been a wonder drug for her cat. In addition to being an appetite stimulant, Periactin is also an antihistamine used for human allergies. Other veterinarians, like Dr. Raclyn, claim limited success in putting cats or dogs on antihistamines, but both Casey and her veterinarian were thrilled with Dominic's progress on Periactin.

Stop the Itch - For Good

Whether holistic or traditional, most veterinarians discourage the long-term use of cortisone injections to stop itching because prolonged use can be harmful to a cat's kidneys. Dr. Doering gives a cortisone shot initially for immediate relief but gives allergy shots based on serum allergy test results for longer-term treatment of pollen and mold allergies. These extracts desensitize or hyposensitize the cat to the allergy source like allergy shots for humans and are effective 75-90 percent of the time, Dr. Doering says.

Your veterinarian need not be a specialist to perform serum allergy tests or formulate allergy vaccines. A veterinary school or the closest dermatology/allergy specialist can consult with your veterinarian by phone, or in some cases online for more precise instructions, Dr. Doering says.

Cats suffer from allergies less frequently than dogs, Dr. Doering says. He estimates he sees one cat for every nine dogs in his practice. "I like cats and I'd be a feline allergy specialist if I could, but then I'd starve to death! We don't get many cats in here, but the cases we do get are pretty desperate."

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