

Is Your Cat Allergic?

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

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"If someone brought a cat to me and said, 'I think my cat has an allergy,' first we'd have to determine that was actually the case," Dr. Raclyn says. "It can be a very difficult thing to determine. There's a process of elimination that you have to go through."

Dr. Raclyn emphasizes all cats have an "allergy threshold," a point at which symptoms such as itching manifest themselves. "Any cat can develop an allergy problem to any substance and the allergy can exist without symptoms for a long time until that threshold is crossed. For example, a cat can eat chicken for years with no apparent problems and then, all of a sudden boom! chicken allergy," he says.

Although genetics can be a factor, the quality of a cat's diet can make a difference in the treatment and prevention of allergy problems, Dr. Raclyn says. "Natural foods, omega-3 fatty acids and a good multivitamin supplement are essential."

Start With the Food Pinpointing the trigger to your cat's reactions can be tricky, especially if it's allergic to more than one substance, which is common. George Doering, DVM, a veterinary allergy specialist from the San Francisco Bay area, says he begins the process by working with the animal's diet. "Usually we see patients after they've had two or three cortisone shots and they're still itching," he says. "The first thing we do is change the food to see if that's the problem."

Dr. Doering suggests a homemade diet with potato as a starch and an exotic form of protein such as rabbit, venison or duck, because these foods are unlikely to be in the cat's regular diet. "You won't see changes right away you have to give it at least eight weeks. Some specialists will even tell you 12 weeks, but it takes at least eight," he says.

If yours is a multiple-cat household, Dr. Raclyn recommends all cats in the house eat the same food, if possible. "Feeding cats separately is extremely difficult, if not impossible," he says. It's hard to keep one cat out of another cat's food.

Food addictions due to flavor enhancers in many commercial foods can be an impediment to starting a cat on a new diet, says Ihor Basko, DVM, a Hawaii-based holistic practitioner and acupuncturist.