

## SNIFF AND SCRATCH

Allergies don't afflict only people. If your pet seems to have an itch that just won't stop, it could well be reacting to a trigger in the air (springtime blooms!) or in its food. Here are some ways to spot—and soothe—the symptoms.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARQUITOS FARINA



**THINK "PET ALLERGIES"** and you no doubt picture a person who starts sneezing at the mere sight of a cat. But cats and dogs can suffer from allergies, too, including seasonal varieties. Skin allergies were the number-one reason dogs were taken to the vet in the U.S. in 2013, and also ranked among the top 10 ailments for cats the same year, according to Veterinary Pet Insurance (VPI).

Allergies in pets and humans are triggered by many of the same things (pollen, dust, mold spores, and certain foods, to name a few) and can be inborn or develop later in life. The way they differ is in their symptoms, says Ashley Gallagher, a staff veterinarian at Friendship Hospital for Animals, in Washington, D.C. Rather than sneezing or watery eyes, most pet allergies cause persistent scratching, which can make them hard to

diagnose and treat, says Jeff Werber, a veterinarian in Los Angeles. You need to be a bit of a pet detective to ease your furry friend's suffering.

### ► Know the Symptoms

In cats, all allergies generally look the same: scratching leads to scabs and sores, a condition called miliary dermatitis. Dogs send out a few more specific signs. Itchiness on the rump suggests a flea allergy, and on the inside of the belly and thighs implicates pollen; face rubbing and foot chewing may signal a food allergy. If the symptoms occur year-round, your dog is most likely reacting to something in the home or its food, while irritation in spring or fall could point to seasonal allergies. Many pets experience only mild forms, but if yours scratches enough to cause sore spots or hair loss, it's time to see the vet.

### ► Provide Relief

Depending on the results of allergy tests, blood work, and other screenings, your vet may suggest medications such as immunosuppressants. A new drug called Apoquel may also help break the itch cycle in dogs. You can take steps at home to alleviate symptoms, even without knowing the cause. Reduce exposure to common allergens such as dust and fleas by frequently combing and bathing your pet (which helps wash away pollen), regularly vacuuming and cleaning its bedding, and using air purifiers. If you suspect a seasonal allergy, consider preventing the symptoms altogether by giving your pet antihistamines a few weeks before the bloom. You can also try eliminating foods one at a time—common culprits include beef, chicken, lamb, dairy, and wheat. "It can be frustrating to treat allergies in pets," says Gallagher. "But if you stick with it, you can manage and control the itch." —Karen Asp

### ▼ Holistic Help

If you're concerned about dosing your pet with various meds, consider taking a holistic approach to treatment. Rather than seeing allergies as the result of an external trigger that must be controlled, holistic vets consider them a dysfunction of the immune system and start treatment by looking for a root cause.

There are three potential culprits, says Marcie Fallek, a holistic veterinarian who practices in New York City and Fairfield, Connecticut: overvaccination, emotional stress, and an inadequate or imbalanced diet. "We work to cure, not just manage, the allergy," she says.

Once a cause is identified, holistic vets advise non-medical treatments to get the immune system back on track. These can include holistic treatments such as herbs, acupuncture, and nutritional supplements.

The one caveat? "Holistic therapies don't necessarily work quickly or instantly," says Fallek. "But in most cases you will find a permanent cure, with patience."