



Allergies in cats

Cats of any age may become suddenly allergic to something they have been exposed to throughout their life and it can take time and patience to determine what is causing their symptoms. Even though vets can run tests to narrow the possibilities down, it's usually a process of elimination that rules potential causes in or out. Minimising exposure to the allergen and managing the reaction is the key to getting the condition under control.

Common symptoms that your cat has an allergy

- Skin and ear infections and red, sore areas of skin
- Increased scratching, pulling out chunks of fur and breaking the skin
- Increased licking and over-grooming, paw chewing and ear scratching which can lead to hair loss usually around the head and neck
- Snoring caused by an inflamed throat
- Sore eyes
- Dull, brittle fur

Less common symptoms are runny nose, sneezing, vomiting & diarrhoea

The three main things that cause allergic reactions in cats are fleas, the environment or food

Fleas - Flea Allergy Dermatitis is an itchy skin condition which occurs when cats develop allergic reactions to the chemicals in flea saliva. They can react to just one bite. Symptoms include redness of the skin, bumps, scabs & in severe cases hair loss. The lower back, upper tail, neck & the back of the legs are areas most affected and your cat responds by scratching, grooming themselves excessively or chewing at the site. Ensure your cat is regularly treated for fleas and worms & or try changing brands of flea treatment.

The environment – If your cat starts to snore or has respiratory problems and an inflamed throat these symptoms can be caused by substances they are inhaling such as smoke, perfume or cleaning products. To determine the cause you need to eliminate each thing, one at a time. Your cat may also become allergic to the cat litter you are using so try changing it by gradually mixing it with another type at first. Other environmental irritants include pollen, grass, fungi, mould, and dust. These are very difficult to avoid but keeping your cat indoors and changing cleaning products is a good start.

Food

Food allergies are fairly common. The most common proteins used in cat food are beef, fish and chicken. These proteins are sometimes mistakenly identified by the cat's immune system and attacked as hostile which causes an allergic reaction. However most cat foods also contain artificial colouring or fillers which also contain irritant proteins, typically grains such as wheat and barley and corn and eggs. If you give your cat milk this may be causing problems, as despite what many people think, most cats are lactose intolerant and lack the enzymes to digest milk products

How to identify and treat food allergies

This involves much trial and error and can take a lot of time. The starting point is to give the cat food that doesn't contain any allergy-inducing ingredients. The protein should be novel, in other words one that that is rarely used and your cat has probably never eaten before. Examples of foods which contain novel proteins are Royal Canin Sensitivity Control - duck (wet &/or dry), Ziwi Peak venison or lamb (wet &/or dry), Hills d/d - duck or venison (dry only) or Kiwi Kitchen- venison or lamb (wet &/or dry). These foods are produced under strict quality control compared to the food you buy in supermarkets and contain no other contaminants such as fillers or grains. A recent advancement in treating food allergies has been the introduction of food which is hydrolysed. This process breaks down the proteins making them too small to cause an allergic reaction. Examples of hydrolysed food are Purina HA -soy based (dry only), Royal Canin Hypoallergenic - poultry-feather based (dry only) or HP (soy based), Hill's z/d -chicken liver based (wet &/or dry).

Most cats with allergies are very itchy, so you may need to treat their existing symptoms as well as changing their diet to a hypoallergenic food. Vets can prescribe low-dose corticosteroids such as prednisolone, or antibiotics/antifungals as appropriate.

It can take a few months to determine if a contaminant in food is responsible for your cat's allergic reaction but the result will be a calmer, healthier cat.

