



Flea Allergies



Flea allergy dermatitis (FAD) is the official name for an allergic reaction to fleabites causing skin disease. It is a common cause of skin problems in dogs and cats.

Although it is more common during warm weather, it can occur year-round as fleas persist in our homes.

Cause

When a flea bites your pet, it injects saliva into the skin. In some pets, their immune system overreacts to proteins in the saliva causing an allergic reaction. This causes an intense itchiness making your pet miserable.

Fleas must bite your pet to cause the reaction and it only takes one fleabite to start it. Pets that are allergic to other things are usually also allergic to fleabites.

Signs

Flea allergies cause severe itching and your pet will be scratching, licking, and chewing excessively. This leads to inflammation (redness) of the skin, sores, and hair loss. Because of the skin damage, bacterial and yeast infections are common. Infections make the itchiness even worse and it becomes a vicious cycle.

Signs in dogs can include redness, hair loss, scales, crusty spots, bumps, thickened or darkened skin, or hot spots. Hot spots are red, oozing areas on the skin that become crusty.



Cats usually have miliary dermatitis, many small crusty bumps on the skin. They can also develop hair loss and redness, especially with excessive licking.



The location of the itchiness and sores is typically in certain parts of the body. In dogs, it is usually “the flea triangle” – from the middle of the back to the tail base and down the rear legs. It often starts at the rump. In cats, it is usually on the back, neck, and face.



Diagnosis

The typical pattern of skin disease and the way it looks is a big clue that a fleabite allergy is present. Finding a flea confirms it. However, you won't see fleas if they are in small numbers. These pets are licking and biting themselves and removing fleas in the process. You may see "flea dirt" which is flea feces. It is darkish debris at the base of the hair, comma shaped if you can see it well enough. If you put some on a wet towel, it will turn red (from the blood the flea has eaten).

Allergy testing is available to test for flea allergies. We don't recommend this, though, unless you want to test your pet for other allergies at the same time.

We advise treating all itchy pets for fleas to eliminate the possibility of a fleabite allergy.

Treatment

The only effective treatment for fleabite allergies is to prevent fleas from biting your pet. This requires strict flea control for all pets in the household. It is critical to treat all dogs and cats in the house, even the ones that never or rarely go outside. Fleas can get into your home and any untreated pet will become the flea factory for your pet that is allergic to fleas. You may also need to treat the house and yard.

It will take 2-3 months of treatment to eliminate the fleas in your home. When you have a pet that is allergic to fleabites, the best prevention is year-round, continuous flea treatment.

See our other articles on fleas for details on controlling these pests.

In addition to eliminating the fleas causing the problem, your pet will need medication to treat bacterial and/or fungal infections if they are present. Your pet will probably also need some medication to stop the itchiness so he feels better. This will usually be for a short time.

Summary

Keep in mind that your pet may be allergic to other things besides fleabites. In that case, your pet may improve but not be completely free of allergy signs. We then need to do some testing to find out the other causes.

A general rule of thumb: **ALWAYS** treat an itchy pet for fleas even if you don't see fleas. You want to make sure you eliminate fleas as a possible cause.

