

# Ditch the itch



## Dr Sarah Elliott BVetMed MRCVS investigates the art of managing cats with allergies

**M**ost of us know of at least one person who has an allergy and there is a good chance this person is you! Maybe you've experienced the sneezy runny nose of hayfever, had childhood asthma or perhaps wearing rubber gloves gives you a rash. If you are an allergy sufferer, you'll know that controlling the symptoms of allergy can be a fine art.

Unfortunately pet allergies are the second most likely cause of home allergies, according to Allergy UK, and allergies to cats are common. But did you know that cats can also suffer from a variety of allergies themselves?

There are three types of allergy commonly seen in the cat: *flea allergy dermatitis* (by far the commonest), *food allergy* (a reaction by the animal's body to a particular food stuff) and *feline atopic dermatitis* (environmental allergies).

If your cat has an allergy, you may notice a lot of itching and scratching! Some cats appear to spend long periods of time excessively grooming, rubbing their face or pulling out fur. Other cats can be secretive about their grooming habits. For these cats, the only outward sign of allergy may be changes in the coat or skin. This might include redness, fur loss, dandruff and small red crusts on the skin. Sometimes ulcerated plaques are seen on the legs, belly or lips. In cats with a food allergy, vomiting and diarrhoea may also feature.

### Fleas

*Flea allergy dermatitis* is the most common cause of skin disease in dogs and cats. The underlying cause is a hypersensitivity to the saliva of fleas which creates an excessive reaction to flea bites. Fleas have been around since the time of the dinosaurs and are incredibly hardy creatures. Flea eggs can persist in both the indoor and outdoor environment for many months. It can be a real struggle to keep a flea-allergic cat completely free of flea bites. One of the most common misconceptions about flea allergy is that for there to have been a flea bite, the owner would surely have spotted a flea. This is not necessarily the case! When investigating the cause of a flare up in a flea-allergic cat, it is common to 'see no fleas' on a physical examination. Flea control must be maintained for the life of your cat wherever a flea allergy is suspected. Get advice from your vet who will be able to prescribe safe and effective methods of flea control. All

the pets in the home will need regular flea treatment to help minimise the risk of a flea-allergic pet getting bitten. It is usually advisable to treat the environment to get rid of any fleas in your carpets and furnishings. Again, ask your vet for advice on choosing a suitable product.

### Food allergies

Fleas remain the most common cause of skin disease in cats, but they are not the only reason cats may develop itchy skin. A *food allergy* is diagnosed by feeding a type of food that has never, or rarely, been fed before, and waiting to see if the symptoms of allergy resolve. This is not simply a case of switching one brand of cat food to another, as the ingredients are often very similar. Your vet may recommend a specialised 'hypoallergenic' diet for a trial period, usually lasting six to eight weeks to rule out a food allergy. It is important that during the trial the cat does not eat anything other than the prescribed diet, so steps may have to be taken to prevent a cat from hunting or finding treats at the neighbour's house.

### The environment

*Feline atopic dermatitis* arises when the cat develops a hypersensitivity to moulds, dust mites, pollens or other agents in the general environment that can be difficult to pin down. In most cats, the condition is diagnosed by ruling out all other potential causes of itching, including parasites and food. Allergy testing can be performed on cats but the results are rather unreliable.

With all causes of allergy, life-long medication to relieve the discomfort of itching may be required. Steps can be taken to avoid certain known causes of allergy, such as trialling a hypoallergenic diet and strictly controlling fleas. Antihistamines and essential fatty acid supplements can help alleviate some symptoms. However many cats require long-term immunosuppressive drugs to control the condition.

Feline allergies are typically incurable and patients do not 'grow out' of their allergies. However, the treatments vets can offer to help manage the symptoms of feline allergy are usually effective. There are now many management options available for allergic cats. Every patient is different, so the treatment plans are different for all patients. This is where the art of managing the allergic cat comes into play. ●