



Dr Mark Craig

Skin allergies in dogs

Dr Mark Craig has specialised in veterinary dermatology since 1995 – treating animals (from dogs to hippos!) with challenging skin disorders and carrying out research. He is a member of the Raw Feeding Veterinary Society.

Charlie has always been a scratchy dog, worse in the spring and early summer, but bad at any time of the year. He scratches, rubs, licks his paws, shakes his head. He's fine when out on his walks and playing, and sometimes he goes days or weeks without scratching. But sooner or later, back it comes, just as bad, if not worse than before. You've taken Charlie to the vets many times. They give him tablets which usually help, at least for a while, but you don't want Charlie on drugs for the rest of his life. So, what's going on?

One possible explanation for Charlie's problems is skin allergy. Skin allergies are very common in the modern world, not only in dogs, but also in cats, horses, and not least, in people. The more we discover about allergies, the more we realise how little we really understand, but basically an allergy is a disorder of the immune system. A dog's immune system should protect against external agents like viruses, bacteria, parasites, and fungi. However, it can become disordered, appearing to be both overactive and underactive. On the one hand, it starts attacking what it wrongly perceives as foreign invaders such as house dust mites, pollens, moulds, insects and other familiar, harmless items in the home environment. It may even attack parts of the dog's own body. On the other hand, it becomes less able to keep in check micro-organisms like bacteria and yeasts which cause no harm and may even be beneficial when present on the skin in low numbers, but which can cause serious skin infections when allowed to overgrow. These changes in the way the immune system works lead to inflammation and damage to the skin, making it less resilient and more susceptible to further damage. A classic vicious cycle!

What can be done for Charlie? A detailed veterinary allergy investigation can help provide a diagnosis and enable more targeted, specific treatment. Having Charlie referred to a veterinary dermatologist should be considered. There are three major steps in such an investigation.

1) The history

The first and most important step is for the vet to find out exactly what has been happening. Is the problem restricted to the skin or are there other issues, for example, vomiting, diarrhoea, weight loss, breathing difficulties, lameness? Is the dog depressed or lethargic? When, how and where did the skin problem start? How has it progressed? What exactly are the clinical signs? Which treatments help and which don't? Are people and other animals in the household affected? Where does the dog sleep? Where does it spend most of its time? What does it eat and drink? Have fleas been seen on the patient or other animals in the household? Dogs are not born with allergies, but some are more susceptible to developing them. Most dogs with skin allergies start to become itchy between the age of 6 months and 3 years.

2) The examination

The next step is the clinical examination, in which the skin and the dog as a whole are assessed. The vet may wish to perform tests, such as skin scrapings, coat brushings, swabs and biopsies, to look for evidence of skin infections, fleas and other parasites, and to help rule out conditions that mimic allergy. An elimination diet for around 6-8 weeks, and strict flea control, may be suggested to investigate a possible involvement of food and fleas.

3) Allergy testing

Once a skin allergy has been diagnosed, allergy testing can be carried out to identify specific reactions. There are two types of allergy test, the skin test and the blood or serological test. Both are very informative, but the skin test is generally regarded by veterinary dermatologists as the gold standard. Items tested include house dust mites, forage mites, pollens, insects and moulds, all of which can act as triggers for an allergic dog.

Armed with information from our detailed investigation, we are well placed to start treatment. Although there is no cure for allergy, we can often manage it pretty successfully. Treatment does not always need to be drug-based. Avoiding triggers is arguably the best approach though unfortunately the hardest, particularly for dogs allergic to both indoor and outdoor substances. We should try to reduce exposure to items incriminated on the allergy tests. When reactions to house dust mites are demonstrated, we should try to keep allergic dogs out of bedrooms, and away from bedding and carpets. Having them sleep in a hard-floored utility room or outside in a secure kennel may be helpful. We should aim to clean and vacuum thoroughly and frequently. We should also try to avoid feeding items incriminated in the elimination diet. Many owners report improvements in their dog's skin and coat following a change to raw feeding, with either a home-prepared diet based on raw meaty bones, or one of many commercial raw diets. Any diet must meet the nutritional and behavioural needs of the individual dog.

Treating the skin directly with, for example, shampoos, sprays, creams and ear drops, can help enormously, sometimes even allowing us to avoid tablets and injections altogether. There is a huge range of topical products that can be tailored to the needs of the patient.

Drug-based therapies are typically aimed at relieving the itch and making the dog feel more comfortable, rather than addressing the underlying problem. However, one treatment, immunotherapy, is aimed at influencing the immune system over the long-term and reducing the incidence of skin problems. Immunotherapy is based on results of allergy testing and identification of possible triggers and is customised specifically for each patient. It can be given either by injection or oral solution sprayed into the mouth. Between forty and seventy percent of dogs treated with immunotherapy are thought to show improvement.

For severely affected dogs, some form of symptomatic relief is usually needed, at least in the short term. Steroids have been used for many years to reduce itch and inflammation. They are cheap and typically very effective. However, they can cause a range of short- and long-term side-effects, including eating, drinking and peeing more, weight gain, panting, hormonal alterations, increased risk of infection, behavioural issues, stomach problems and even changes to the skin. In recent years, other treatments have become available which block messages to the brain telling it the dog has an itch which needs to be scratched! These treatments are often highly effective, although less so in some dogs, in particular those susceptible to ear problems and repeated skin infections. Antibiotics are frequently prescribed for skin infections, a common complication in dogs with skin allergies. They can bring about dramatic resolution, albeit temporary, but are now used with greater caution due to worries about the development of resistance and adverse effects on the immune system.

Other treatments include oil supplements and antihistamines. Essential fatty acids help to optimise skin quality and encourage the dog to produce more of its own anti-inflammatory products. Antihistamines are sometimes helpful but their effects in dogs with skin allergies are often disappointing.

The prognosis for complete resolution of canine skin allergies may be poor, but there is a lot that we can do to ensure dogs like Charlie remain happy and enjoy an excellent quality of life.

Dr Mark Craig, who is registered on the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons list of Advanced Veterinary Practitioners for Small Animal Dermatology, can be reached via his practice: www.refurall-referrals.co.uk