So my cat has allergies

What are allergies and what types of allergies are there?
Allergies are an over reaction of the cat’s immune system to foreign substances or allergens. There are three common types of allergies in cats. Cats may have more than one type of allergy or develop more later in life.

• Flea allergy dermatitis:
  o Cats who have a flea allergy are reacting to the saliva of the fleas.
  o These cats can receive one bite from a flea (which may never be found) and have systemic response similar to hives.

• Atopic dermatitis or atopy:
  o Cats who have atopic dermatitis or atopy have an environmental allergy.
  o These cats may be allergic to grasses, pollens, dust mites, trees, etc.
  o This type of allergy affects indoor/outdoor cats with the same prevalence.
  o Environmental allergens may be seasonal or year round.
  o Typically cats are young when they first present- one to five years old.

• Food allergies:
  o These cats have an allergic response to something in their diet- typically the protein source.
  o This can occur even if the cat has eaten the same thing his/her whole life.
  o Typically cats are young when they first present- one to five years old.

What are the clinical signs of allergies?
The common clinical signs for all three types of allergies can look the same:

• Itching, scratching, over grooming.
• Scabs/bumps/crust
  o With food allergies and atopy these tend to be on the head and neck
  o With flea allergies these tend to be on the back half of the cat near the tail base
• Excessive ear wax formation without a previous history of severe ear mites.

How are allergies diagnosed?
A good physical exam and history are essential to the diagnosis of allergies. Depending on the type of allergy different strategies may be used to make a diagnosis.

• Flea allergy dermatitis-
  o Strict flea control, with a recommended product, is instituted and the response to the flea control is monitored.

• Food allergies-
  o The only way to diagnose a food allergy is to do an elimination diet trial.
    ▪ An elimination diet trial entails feeding your cat a prescription diet which contains proteins broken down so small that they can not cause an allergic reaction.
    ▪ The diet is fed a minimum of 12 weeks and the response is monitored.
• The cat is ONLY able to eat the diet and nothing else- this includes treats, hunting, table scraps etc.
  • Atopy/environmental allergies
    o The best way to diagnose environmental allergies is through serum testing.
    o We typically refer to a dermatologist for this.
  • Additional tests/ treatments may be recommend to rule out other common causes of skin disease such as ring worm cultures and antibiotic trials

**What are treatment options?**
There are two routes of treatment options available. The first route is to diagnose a specific set of allergic substances for an individual cat and then treat for these allergies. Not everyone is able to do the testing required to diagnose a specific allergy and thus the second route of treatment is symptomatic treatment where the clinical signs of the allergy are controlled.

• Treating the specific allergy
  o Flea allergy dermatitis- strict flea control.
  o Food allergy- The diet used for the elimination trial can be continue long term or a limited ingredient diet can be found that works with the patients specific allergy.
  o Atopy/environmental allergies- a desensitization or immunotherapy program can be started. Immunotherapy can be with injections or oral drops. A dermatologist will help with the formation of a desensitization/ immunotherapy treatment plan.

• Treating the clinical signs- the treatment to decrease the itching tends to be the same.
  o Prednisolone- this is a steroid. Steroids work to decrease inflammation and itching. The lowest dose possible that controls the clinical signs is found. The possible long-term side effect of inducing diabetes is a concern. Steroids are sometimes used to control clinical signs while further testing is completed.
  o Cyclosporine (Atopica) - this works to inhibit the immune response to allergies and thus decrease the sensation of itching. It should not be given to cats who are at risk of toxoplasmosis (a parasite) or cats who have cancer.

**What sort of monitoring is required?**
Home monitoring and close communication with us is key for allergies! Allergies can be long and frustrating so if the first thing we try does not work, don’t give up! Routine physical exams are the second most important part of monitoring for allergies. If long-term medications, such as steroids, are prescribed, yearly blood work is required.

**What if I want to learn more?**
We are always happy to discuss allergies further as they can be confusing! Please let us know if you have any questions or would like more detailed handouts on specific types of allergies.

Sources:
- Allergy- Lifelearn Inc. MacNabb House

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