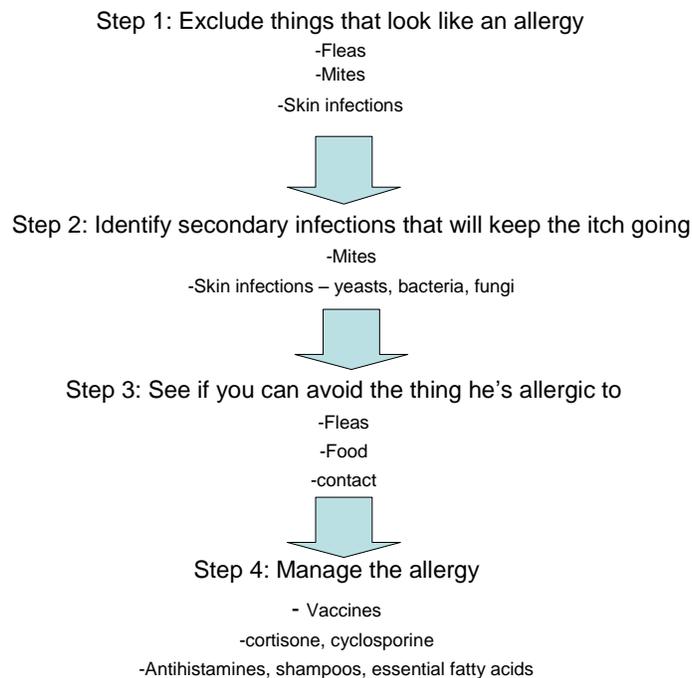


The dog is scratching AGAIN!

I often hear this from clients: 'My dog has been itchy FOR EVER and all my vet does is give me those little white (cortisone) pills. All this cortisone can't be good for him - SURELY there must be another option?'

The short answer is yes, there is. But if your dog really is allergic, then the alternatives are not cheap or easy.

When an itchy dog is presented to a vet, there are set of steps (s)he goes through to determine how best to treat your dog.



Step 1: (S)he will check for fleas. Sometimes dogs are allergic to fleas and just one or two will have them itching constantly. More commonly there are just lots of fleas resulting in lots of itchy bites. Effective flea control is a whole article on its own, but in summary you need to treat all dogs and cats in the house with something that kills the adults AND something that prevents the fleas breeding in the environment - all year round. If you don't, you cannot blame the product for not working.

Sarcoptic mange mites can cause intense itchiness and are quite difficult to find on skin scrapings. If your pet has sarcoptic mange and is treated correctly for it, it is usually cured - and the itch goes away. Because the infestation is

difficult to exclude, many vets will treat suspicious cases in the hopes that the itch will be cured.

Step 2: Your vet will identify bugs that grow on skin that is already traumatized by scratching. The most common culprits are yeasts called malassezia and superficial bacterial infections. More rarely, ringworm (a fungus) can cause secondary infections and hairloss but is not usually itchy in its own right in dogs. If you don't treat the secondary infections, your pet will say itchy EVEN IF you've managed to avoid / get rid of the inciting trigger!

Step 3: Next, your vet will determine whether you could avoid the thing that's making your dog itchy. Basically allergies can develop to

- fleas
- food
- things in direct contact with the dog's skin (collars, food bowls, fabric softeners, floor polish)
- airborne things - which can be seasonal like pollens and seeds from grasses and trees or non-seasonal like house dust mites, environmental fungi, storage mites and human dander

You usually find out that your pet has a flea allergy by monitoring his response to treatment. If your pet has a flea allergy you're OK: no need for the little white pills. 'All' you have to do is maintain your flea eradication campaign.

Your vet will suggest some environmental modification if it sounds like your dog could be suffering from a contact allergy. This usually means confining your dog to the kitchen / a yard for some days waiting for the itch to resolve and then re-exposing him to the suspected trigger. Again, if you can avoid the collar / bowl / floor polish involved, you're fine. No white pills.

Next, your vet will almost certainly advise a food trial. Dogs are generally allergic to a protein component in the food - because that's what the immune system recognizes most easily. To do a useful food trial, you will need to find a protein that your dog has never eaten (in the hopes that if the immune system has never been exposed to that protein, it can't have become allergic to it). This means you need to look at the ingredients of the dog food your dogs has eaten and also need to list the table food and treats he gets. Then you need to find something made from protein from a DIFFERENT animal.

There are lots of food options. They fall into 3 categories

1. A home cooked diet made from the same protein and a starch (potato, rice) fed for 6-8 weeks. This is considered to be the best by most dermatologists. It is also the most labour-intensive and usually also the most expensive. It can be very difficult to find a new protein for a pet that regularly has table scraps and thus has been exposed to a wide variety of proteins already.

2. A prescription diet from the vet that is made from a single protein and a single starch. There are a number of options eg Hill's d/d, Eukanuba dermatosis.
3. Hydrolysed diets eg Royal Canin hypoallergenic and Hill's z/d. Here the protein has been broken down into such small pieces that the immune system cannot recognize it. These diets are sometimes the only option when a dog has had a wide variety of foods
4. 'Sensitive' skin diets: NB These are NOT made from a single protein source and are NOT suitable if you want to do a proper exclusion diet. Occasionally, dogs react to preservatives / colorants used in some foods and in these cases the 'sensitive' diets could help. Personally, I would prefer to do ONE food trial though. These foods could be considered once you've already identified that your pet has a food allergy. Some dogs will remain itch free on these diets. If your pet doesn't, go back to what you know works.

If you're going to do a food trial with your dog it is vitally important that you and your family do not cheat. Think of a person with a peanut allergy. They can get dangerously ill if peanuts are processed in the same factory as the food they're eating. It really only needs a TINY piece of biltong or a weenie piece of cheese for someone to negate your food trial. So don't give in to those doleful eyes. Use only the exclusion diet and water for 6-8 weeks and see what happens. (Warning: milk contains protein and dairy allergies are relatively common in dogs. Warning no2: use a canned version of your exclusion diet to administer pills. People often forget that the viennas, cream cheese, butter, liver pate, bar one that they use to get the pill down contain ... protein. Protein that your pet could be allergic to.)

The reward is huge: if it works, you can control the itch by feeding the right food. No little white pills. No pills at all. No side effects from pills. No depleted bank account from alternatives to little white pills.

Step 4. If all this doesn't work, you're stuck with managing the itch. You have the following options.

1. Cortisone (prednisone / 'pred') only: The up side: it's cheap, readily available and it works well in allergic dogs. The down side: depending on how much cortisone your dog needs, she will drink and wee more, will be a lot hungrier, will tend to gain weight. If your dog needs high doses, cortisone will enlarge the liver, cause fat accumulation in the abdomen and muscle loss and cause hair thinning / slow regrowth eg where she's been clipped. So it's not ideal. And you definitely want to use the least effective dose.
2. You can do a blood test to identify what he's allergic to and then use specially designed vaccines to try and get the immune system to ignore it. The blood test generally costs between R1000-1500 and each batch of vaccines cost about the same again as they're made up especially for the

- individual dog. A bottle of vaccine will usually last 3-6 months. The vaccines significantly decrease the itch in 70% of dogs. In a proportion of dogs you still need to use additional means to help control the itch. The allergy vaccines are used for life. The bonus is that you don't use cortisone - so no accidents indoors, no getting up at night to let the dog out, no dog begging constantly for food.
3. You can use cyclosporine to decrease the itch instead of cortisone. The side effects are less pronounced and usually less severe - some mild gastrointestinal upsets in some dogs, rarely changes in the gums. The down side is that treatment for a 10 kg dog is likely to set you back around R1000 per month. Once the itch is controlled, you may be able to get away with half doses - ie around R500 per month. In the UK, some dermatologists use the allergy vaccines with cyclosporine for optimal control in their patients, but most people in South Africa cannot afford this.
 4. Cortisone used with stuff to decrease the itch: The 'stuff' includes antihistamines, essential fatty acids, topical ointments eg for ear infections, and shampoos. This works out more expensive than cortisone alone but decreases cortisone side effects. The exact combination of 'stuff' has to be tailored to each individual because eg individual dogs respond differently to different antihistamines.

Allergies are for life - they will not go away. This means it is worth spending money and effort in excluding things that look like allergies but aren't and identifying whether you can avoid what your pet is allergic to.

If you can't avoid what she's allergic to, you're left with finding the best way of managing the situation in your particular case. If you're controlling an allergy with pills, it is unrealistic to expect that the itch will go away completely. You're aiming for a comfortable dog - itching occasionally but not enough to cause any wounds / hair loss.