



BRIARPOINTE VETERINARY CLINIC

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FLEA ALLERGY IN CATS

What are allergies, and how do they affect cats?

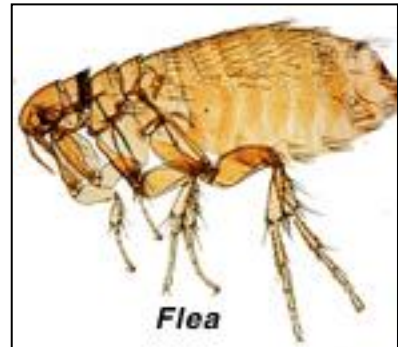
One of the most common conditions affecting cats is allergic dermatitis or skin allergies. In the allergic state, the cat's immune system "overreacts" to foreign substances called *allergens* or *antigens*. These overreactions are manifested in several ways. The most common is itching of the skin, either localized in one area or generalized itching all over the cat. Another manifestation involves the respiratory system and may result in coughing, sneezing, and wheezing. Sometimes, there may be an associated nasal or ocular (eye) discharge. The third manifestation involves the digestive system, resulting in vomiting or diarrhea. The specific response that occurs is related to the type of allergy present.

Does that mean that there are several types of allergies?

There are five known types of allergies in the cat: contact, flea, food, bacterial, and inhalant. Each of these has some common expressions in cats, and each has some unique features.

What is meant by the term "flea allergy"?

In spite of common belief, a normal cat experiences only minor skin irritation in response to flea bites. Even in the presence of dozens of fleas, there will be very little itching. On the other hand, the cat with flea allergies has a severe, reaction to flea bites. This occurs because the cat develops an allergic response to the flea's saliva. When the cat is bitten, flea saliva is deposited in the skin. Just one bite causes intense itching.



What does this reaction do to the cat?

The cat's response to the intense itching is to chew, lick, or scratch. This causes hair loss and can lead to open sores or scabs on the skin, allowing a secondary bacterial infection to begin. The area most commonly involved is over the rump, just in front of the tail. This is probably because fleas find this part of the cat more desirable. Many flea-allergic cats also chew or lick the hair off of their legs. Itching and hair loss around the tail base, neck and head should be considered suspicious for flea allergy dermatitis.

What is the treatment for flea allergy dermatitis?

The most important treatment for flea allergy is to control and prevent flea bites. Strict flea control is the backbone of successful treatment. There are many products available for flea control, and many work in entirely different manners. In some cases, multiple products may be needed. Some are used on the cat and some in the cat's environment. Fortunately, with today's modern and highly efficacious flea preventives, flea control is achievable by all cat owners.

Corticosteroids ("cortisone" or "steroids") can be used to block the allergic reaction and give immediate relief. This is often a necessary part of dealing with flea allergy. Some cats respond best to long-acting injections and others to oral medication. Cats are much more resistant to the negative side-effects of steroids than humans and dogs, but significant side-effects can occur if they are not used properly. One of these potential side effects is the development of Diabetes Mellitus. For this reason, the goal is to administer the smallest amount of steroid needed to keep the cat comfortable. Some cats develop a secondary bacterial infection in the skin. When this occurs, appropriate antibiotics must be used.

Edited by John S. Parker, DVM
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