

Unwanted reactions

True dietary intolerance or allergies in pets are rare, says **Nicole Paley** of the PFMA

Adverse reactions to food can be divided into two categories – those that act through the immune system (a food allergy) and those that do not (a dietary intolerance).

Although the physiological mechanisms of the two are very different, the symptoms are indistinguishable from one another and from other allergic reactions (ie flea bite allergy or an allergy to something in the pet's environment). The incidence of true dietary intolerance or allergies in pets is very rare. On the whole, the prevalence of true food allergies in the dog and cat population is thought to be only around one in a thousand. Food allergies occur because of a defect in an animal's immune system; they are not caused by a particular problem with the diet.⁽¹⁾

What are the common signs of dietary intolerance/allergies?

You may notice some of the following signs:

- Vomiting or diarrhoea bloating and GI discomfort

- Increased flatulence
- Frequent scratching or hair loss
- Red, inflamed skin
- Chronic ear problems

The most common symptoms are digestive upsets and skin irritation. Ear problems can also be common in some dogs. However, it's important to note that in the majority of cats and dogs with these signs, the irritation will be caused by something other than a food allergy or intolerance.

This could include a flea bite allergy or an allergy to something in their environment, such as dust or pollen, or scavenged foods. The latter is particularly relevant for dogs, who often pick up all sorts of foods they shouldn't eat from all sorts of places.

Veterinary dermatologists estimate that of all the skin cases seen, only a very small percentage, 1-6%, are due to food allergies, with the majority of skin problems having a non-dietary cause.

What causes food intolerance/allergies?

It may take months or years before a dog or cat develops an allergic response/intolerance to a particular food. However, once he's allergic, he will probably always have a negative reaction to that food. Allergic reactions are most commonly associated with protein sources – usually the meat in the pet's food.

Food: Some of the most common causes of food allergies/intolerance in dogs are beef, milk products and wheat gluten.

Damage to the digestive system: Inflammation, infection, surgery and some medications



For accurate diagnosis and guidance on the best diet, owners will need to speak to their vet

can damage the digestive system and may lead to food allergies / intolerance.

Age and breed: Research has shown that some dog breeds, including West Highland terriers, cocker spaniels and Irish setters, appear more likely to develop food allergies/intolerance. Food allergies/intolerances can occur at any age.

How do I find out if it's a food intolerance/allergy causing the problem?

The most practical and accurate method to diagnose a food allergy or intolerance is through an elimination trial overseen by a vet. Key ingredients will be removed from the diet and if the symptoms improve when the suspect food is eliminated then it can be presumed that a dietary

Should I cook for my dog/cat, rather than buy a prepared pet food?

While a homemade diet means you can control exactly what goes in the pet's food, the disadvantages are that it can be time-consuming and difficult to get right. The risk you face is providing a diet that doesn't have all the right nutrients in the right balance.

Feeding a prepared pet food which excludes the problem ingredient is the best way to provide optimum nutrition.

To note

Some symptoms of food allergies/intolerance are similar to those of other serious conditions, so you should consult your vet.

Feeding options for owners

If an elimination trial has identified a sensitivity to a specific ingredient, this will need to be excluded from the diet.

Many pet foods come with a full ingredients list, making it easy for owners to do this. If the sensitivity is to a certain meat, owners may want to try a food with a protein source which is new to the cat or dog, such as duck, salmon, lamb, venison or whitefish.

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References:
I. Buffington, T. Holloway, C. Aboud, S. Manual of Veterinary Dietsetics, pg 118

