

Food Intolerance and Food Allergy

(or, boy this new diet is a lot of trouble! is it really necessary?)

The High Points

1. food intolerance manifests as **itching, gas, diarrhea, vomiting, seizures, colitis (blood in stools)**, etc
2. there is **no way to diagnose** it except to try an elimination diet and subsequent challenges
3. you must **feed the hypoallergenic diet and NOTHING else** but prescribed treats and nonflavored medications for the specified period of time
4. Look critically at all **supplements** for corn starch binders, gelatin capsules, liver flavoring, etc – all of which can be sources of food allergens
5. you need to do **food challenges later** to find out what your pet is allergic to
6. to prevent him/her from becoming allergic to subsequent foods, you need to institute a **rotation diet**

Introduction: Reasons for Using Hypoallergenic Diets

If your pet has chronic skin or gastrointestinal problems, you may eventually be asked to try a hypoallergenic diet. Dogs and cats can have adverse reactions to food, and these reactions may be simple allergies, or something more complex, which is called a food intolerance. Using a hypoallergenic diet allows you to potentially halt the problem, but more importantly, if the problem clears up, you may be able to go back and determine what, in the previous diets, caused the problem.

If diagnosis of food allergy were as easy as a blood test, believe us, we would recommend a blood test. Unfortunately, blood tests are inexact and don't always give an accurate picture of actual allergies or individual pharmacologic sensitivities. Since diagnosis of food allergy and food intolerance is very uncertain, the hypoallergenic diet is the only way to determine what is going on with your pet!

Food intolerance may occur at any age, and doesn't always show up immediately after starting a new diet. In fact, dogs and cats may have been eating the same diet for years before showing symptoms! In cats, you may see itchiness, hair loss, foot pad crusting and skin irritations that are generalized (all over the body) or confined to single ulcerated spots - often around the head and ears. Cats may also exhibit vomiting and diarrhea. Dogs usually have skin problems, but occasionally show diarrhea, gas or vomiting. The itching, irritation and hair loss may occur anywhere on the body including the ears, feet, face, body, etc. Seizures have been reported as a consequence of food allergy in dogs.

Hypoallergenic diets consist of food elements that are not commonly fed to pets, hence, they are less likely to cause signs of intolerance. Common allergens in most pet foods include beef, corn, wheat, chicken and soy, therefore, hypoallergenic diets contain things like fish, duck, venison, potatoes, and barley. **Please remember this - meats and grains are the most common allergens!** In recent years, diets containing lamb and rice were considered hypoallergenic and were very useful for skin and coat problems; however, the flood of lamb and rice products on the market resulted in their becoming common diets, and therefore another potential allergen. Don't be tempted to use lamb and rice as a hypoallergenic diet! This is the reason that we don't recommend

feeding unusual meats like venison, duck or rabbit as a normal diet - we may need them later for hypoallergenic diet trials.

Other components of pet foods that may cause problems are chemicals used for preservatives, colorants and food additives. Documented toxicities include ethoxyquin (FDA, 1997) certain dyes, sodium bisulfite, sodium glutamate, sodium nitrate, BHA, spices, sodium alginate, guar gum and propylene glycol (Roudebush, 1995). We recommend only natural or home prepared diets for these hypoallergenic diet trials.

Secrets to Using Hypoallergenic Diets

1. Use no other commercial diets or treats than the one you choose as the test diet. We recommend the diets below but the specific prescription is different for each patient:

- Novel protein diets: IVD Venison, Duck, or Rabbit, Eukanuba Kangaroo (KO) (dogs only), Hills d/d, Nature's Variety duck or venison (cats only)
- Occasionally, hydrolyzed protein diets: Hills Z/D Ultra, Purina CNM LA and HA
- Exceed

2. Use no snacks other than those recommended by your veterinarian for this period. Ask about green vegetables and carrots - these are usually safe. Starchy vegetables are not good (remember, corn is a major offender because it is so common in normal diets). **No bones or rawhide** for dogs (because they come from beef), and the dogs should receive ONLY unflavored heartworm pills (daily or monthly). Catnip is a great hypoallergenic snack for cats. **Please remember this - meats and grains are the most common allergens!**

3. Use the diet for at least 2 months, and many people recommend 3 months.

4. If your pet is fed something not allowed on the diet, consider the plan back to square one and restart the hypoallergenic diet for another 2-3 months. For instance, if you switch to a hypoallergenic diet of fish and potato (such as IVD or Eukanuba) after feeding a chicken and corn diet (such as Science Diet or Iams), but give occasional treats of fresh chicken - then spending the money and time on feeding the special IVD or Eukanuba diet was a waste of time. **Please remember this - meats and grains are the most common offenders - always check the advisability of a treat with your doctor!**

But what about the rest of my pet's life?

We want your pet to be able to eat everything that is healthy for him. No one wants to restrict his diet to only fish, or only venison, for the rest of his life. The beauty of the hypoallergenic diet is that it gives you a baseline for normalcy in your pet - normal skin or GI function, or a reduced seizure pattern. Once you find this baseline (which takes 2-3 months, as previously described), you may start 'challenging' your pet with single food types, one at a time, to actually identify what he is allergic to.

Let's take an example. If your dog was eating a food containing poultry by-products, corn, and soy grits, and his skin problems improved after switching to venison and rice, you are now able to discover *exactly* what he is allergic to. After feeding the venison and rice for 2-3 months, you should offer a small amount of chicken. Not a food containing chicken and corn and dairy product - only chicken. If you get no reaction within 1-2 weeks, try something else. This time you give him some frozen corn niblets. Presto! His skin flares up!

You have discovered that chicken is probably ok, but corn is not. You don't know about turkey, soy, pork, egg, wheat, beef or anything else until you try them - one at a time. In this way, food by food, you can discover exactly what your animal tolerates, and you can read food labels to determine the right food for a lifetime.

Here is a listing of common food ingredients that you will want to test (or challenge) 1 ingredient at a time, usually in this order:

Any essential medications that were stopped during the diet trial (like glucosamine/chondroitin)

- Lamb
- Rice
- Chicken
- Corn
- Egg
- Dairy (milk or yogurt)
- Beef
- Wheat (bread is a good source)
- Turkey
- Soy (tofu will do)

Do a challenge in this way:

Feed a small amount (1 tsp – ¼ cup depending on the size of the animal) once daily for 3 days, then WAIT for 2 weeks. A reaction to that food could take a few days, and it will take the entire 2 weeks for any reaction (whether you see it or not!) to clear from your pet's body. After the 2 week period, it's time to move to the next challenge. Repeat these 2 week challenge cycles until you develop a list of foods that your pet CAN have, and a list of foods that your pet CANNOT have, based on the reactions. With these lists in hand, we can look at the ingredient listings on commercial foods to see if there is one your pet can eat.

This is not to say that he won't become allergic to another food ingredient in his lifetime. This is quite possible, but since you are now an expert label reader and understand the process of untangling the individual foods, you will be able to figure out what the new offender is.

References

FDA requests that ethoxyquin levels be reduced in dog foods. FDA, Center for Veterinary Medicine press release, Division of Animal Feeds, Rockville MD. August 14, 1997.

Roudebush, P, 1995. Diagnosis and Management of Adverse Food Reactions *In Current Veterinary Therapy XII*, Bonagura, J, Ed. W.B. Saunders, Philadelphia. p. 59-64.