

# Food allergies in cats often require diet trials

Last month I attended the North American Veterinary Conference in Orlando, Fla. The conference had more than 14,000 attendees including veterinarians,



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technicians, academicians, vet industry personnel and guests. I always enjoy these conferences because you never know what you will learn between treatments and procedures, drugs and equipment, and research and future trends.

One of the seminars I attended covered feline food allergies that cause dermatitis. Food allergy is a term used to describe an adverse reaction to a food, but adverse reactions also include food intolerances, which are different. Allergies involve an immune response by the body.

A food intolerance typically occurs as a result of a recent food change. It can be an immediate reaction. Food intolerances are due to either a lack of digestion of an item or a lack of absorption. A food allergy (or hypersensitivity) develops as a result of a longer term

exposure to a food, where an immune response has occurred.

Diagnosing for allergens includes skin testing and blood tests. Unfortunately, all of these tests are unreliable as a method for confirming food allergy in animals with skin disease. The best way to confirm a food allergy is through an elimination diet for four to eight weeks.

Studies have shown that the most common food allergens in cats are fish, dairy, and beef. An elimination diet is a tricky thing, especially if you have a cat that goes outside. You need to consider the food that you are feeding: any snacks, supplements or treats; chewable medications; table food; and what your cat could be eating if he hunts or visits the neighbors. A new, unique-protein source is required in an elimination trial.

There are several veterinary therapeutic diets designed with one special protein source. You may try one or two flavors initially to see what your cat prefers, but then you need to stick with one protein.

The problem with over the counter limited-protein diets is that the labels do not always show all of the ingredients. One study

found that 75 percent of over-the-counter canine, limited-protein diets tested positively for proteins such as soy, beef and poultry.

It is ideal to choose a veterinary "novel" protein diet or homemade food during a diet trial.

In addition to unique-protein diets, there are therapeutic hydrolyzed protein diets. Hydrolyzed proteins have been broken down to such small molecules that they do not trigger an immune response.

If an animal's skin or digestive problems improve after a strict, hypoallergenic diet, most owners choose to continue the diet. To know definitively if a certain protein was causing problems, you would need to rechallenge the pet with this protein.

We are fortunate that we have therapeutic diets in veterinary medicine to help us treat our patients. Given the choice, if a cat's disease could be controlled with diet versus oral medication, an owner is going to choose the diet. Making the diet switch may seem initially complicated, but it is definitely worth a try.

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