

Dr. Roughie's Questions and Answers

Facts and Fallacies About Food Allergies

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Walking down the pet food section of the grocery store aisles or at the vendors at a dog show, one may be literally overwhelmed by the number of pet foods. Many will claim to benefit your dog's skin and hair coat or to increase your luck at the next major competition. It is time to separate fact from fallacy regarding the infamous food allergies and the possible benefit of feeding these "new improved" diets.

Fact: Food allergies do exist in dogs, humans and other species. Since the skin is the "target" organ for many allergies in our canine friends, allergies to food are usually manifested by itchy skin and the sometimes severe consequences of the resulting inflammation and self-trauma. In the dog population as a whole, food allergies are uncommon. However, in the referral dermatology practice, food allergies may comprise as much as 1/3 of the referral caseload. Other very common causes for allergies resulting in skin problems are atopy, which is allergy to inhaled allergens (pollens, dust, molds), and allergy to flea bites.

Fallacy: An allergy to food may be diagnosed by the symptoms. There is only one way of diagnosing a food allergy, and that is by feeding trials. Blood tests, skin tests and signs of the disease are of no distinguishing value in the diagnosis of food allergy at this time. While the distribution of skin lesions may provide a clue as to the differentiation of food allergy, flea allergy, or atopy, these cases will appear similar enough that they cannot be distinguished reliably by anything other than feeding trials.

Fact: The composition of dog foods is more similar than manufacturers would have you believe. Essentially, we should consider all foods to be composed of these essential ingredients:

protein source (eggs, meat, soy), carbohydrate source (corn, barley, wheat, rice, etc) and fats (animal, vegetable). Most foods also contain preservatives and various flavorings or colors and vitamin/mineral additives. The food allergic dog may be allergic to one or more of these major food components.

Fallacy: Feeding lamb and rice will prevent food allergies in my dogs. Lamb and rice are just as “allergenic” as chicken, beef, corn, wheat and barley. Food allergic dogs are genetically programmed to become allergic. The programmed allergic dog that is fed lamb and rice prior to or during the period when allergy develops, is just as likely to react to these food ingredients as to other protein or carbohydrate sources. The origin of the myth about lamb and rice is that they could be used as food ingredients for allergic dogs only when most dogs had never eaten them. With these ingredients now a common component of commercial dog foods, the value of lamb and rice for feeding trials or for management of the food allergic patient has dramatically declined.

Fact: The only way to diagnose and sometimes to treat the food allergic dog is to place the suspect animal on a diet of a single carbohydrate source to which he/she has never been exposed combined with a single protein source to which he/she has never been exposed. Finding these novel protein and carbohydrate sources has become increasingly difficult with the increase in the use of rice and lamb in commercial diets. Many animals must now be placed on home-cooked diets of rare meats such as venison or rabbit with unusual carbohydrate sources such as sweet potatoes, rutabagas, etc. During a feeding trial to diagnose food allergy, nothing else should pass the animal’s lips. Flavored heartworm preventives, treats, rawhides, cow hooves, etc. must all be discontinued. The duration of the feeding trial required to diagnose food allergy may be as long as 6 to 8 weeks. While some animals may show improvement prior to this time, a significant percentage will not improve until at or after 6 weeks.

Fallacy: The feeding of dog foods with preservatives, flavorings and additives has caused the increase in food allergies in dogs.

Fact: The composition of dog foods in the past ten years has changed insignificantly. Flavorings and additives used today were also used ten years ago. Yet dermatologists do report an increase in the diagnosis of food allergies. One factor responsible in part for this increase is an improvement in the ability to diagnose the problem. The bad news is that a major part of the increase in food allergies (as well as atopy, vaccine reactions, and adverse drug reactions) is in the purebred dog population. Breeds of dogs that were relatively free of these conditions ten years ago are experiencing a marked increase. It is therefore very likely that genetic factors are at play here. Allergic disease in humans tends to occur in family lines. In other words, children of allergic individuals are more likely to be allergic themselves. While flavorings and additives may worsen the allergic dog, they rarely cause problems in nonpredisposed individuals.

“So now I’m really confused. What should I feed my dogs?” Feed your dogs a good quality food from a trusted manufacturer. Supplement with table foods if desired. Avoid rare meats and carbohydrates if you have a concern for food allergies developing in the future based upon knowledge of the parents or relatives. And if your dog develops a food allergy, that is accurately diagnosed by proper feeding trials, do not breed that dog.

Much of the above information was derived from a lecture given by Edmund J. Rosser, Jr. DVM and diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Dermatologists.