

ALLERGY IN THE COCKER SPANIEL

by *Emily Rothstein, DVM*

Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Dermatology
Animal Allergy and Dermatology Service of Connecticut
Plantsville, CT

ATOPIC DERMATITIS

ATOPIC DERMATITIS, OR ATOPY, is a genetic condition that can affect any dog. Unfortunately, it is fairly common in the cocker spaniel. “Atopy” is defined as itchy skin that can be seasonal (as during a particular pollen season) or non-seasonal (house dust, tobacco smoke). Certain areas are commonly affected: ears, lip folds, feet; but any area can be itchy.

Cocker Spaniel Rescue of New England (CSRNE) brought Brandi to me about two years ago. Brandi has a history of severe itching on her face, ears and belly that started when she was with her original owner. Unfortunately, that owner was not able to follow up with her treatment plan, and it was not until CSRNE took over that she received the consistent medical care she needed.

She had clinical signs that suggested her itch could be from Sarcoptic mange, food allergy and/or environmental allergy. Since these are hard to separate out, the first step is to try and eliminate the scabies mite, which, in this case, was not found on numerous skin scrapings. However, since this is not uncommon—the mite is not always found in skin scrapings of afflicted dogs—she was first treated for Sarcoptic mange as well as infections which had developed from all the scratching.

When I examined her after she was rescued, I discovered that Brandi’s ears had been infected for so long that she needed major surgery, so CSRNE took her to Tufts Small Animal Hospital where she had bilateral ear ablations (the removal of the infected ear canals).

Because the itch continued, a food trial was done, but that did not help. Therefore, we began testing for environmental allergy and the infections they can cause. A blood allergy test was done (instead of the preferred skin test because she was taking medications that would interfere with the skin testing). We found that she was very allergic to weeds, molds, and dust mites. Allergy shots were started, but they alone did not control the severe itching, which is not uncommon. Antihistamines and essential fatty acids were added to the treatment plan. But Brandi continued to have a moderate amount of itching along with

skin infections. After an exhaustive and unsuccessful search trying to find an antihistamine that would help along with the allergy shots, Brandi was started on very low doses of prednisone to assist in itch control. Sherry DeFeo, Brandi’s foster mom, scrupulously maintained her daily and weekly regime and Brandi is now doing well. She will continue to have her blood monitored to check for possible internal problems that even a small amount of prednisone can cause.

Unfortunately, because atopic dermatitis can start after typical breeding age—usually signs are seen between 1 and 3 years of age—it can be passed along inadvertently to a litter. The hallmark sign is itching (pruritus). Secondary infections caused by scratching are very common and can worsen the itch. Infections can be caused by the normal organisms (flora) that live on the dog, such as yeast and bacteria.

Diagnosis is one of exclusion, calling for a differential diagnoses (distinguishing between diseases of similar character by comparing their signs and symptoms). There are many skin conditions that look like atopic dermatitis, such as Sarcoptic mange, infections due to other causes, flea allergy, food allergy, and other parasitic disease. Initially, the dermatologist evaluates history and symptoms, and eliminates those causes first. Then, if the itch remains, he may conclude that the dog is atopic.

Therapy can take many forms. Corticosteroids (steroids, cortisone) are commonly prescribed because these drugs can be fast and effective for the short term in stopping the itch. However, with certain exceptions, they are not recommended for long-term use due to adverse side effects such as drinking and urinating more, eating more, and behavioral changes and, in the long haul, liver disease, kidney disease, and/or eye and joint problems.

Antihistamines (like Benadryl[®]) can help itchy allergy symptoms in dogs in the same way that they relieve runny noses in people. However, although we use people drugs for dogs, they do not work the same across species. They do not help every dog, but only about 50%; the doses are different; the timing of giving the medicine is different; and, most importantly,

they take nearly two weeks to build up in the system enough to help (vs. humans, where relief is almost immediate). Although not a quick fix, they are, with a few exceptions, safe.

The newest therapy is Atopica[®], the brand name of cyclosporine. This name may be familiar as it is the same drug used for dry eye, but this drug is in capsule form. There are numerous benefits, such as once a day dosing and over 75% effectiveness, but some concerns accompany their use. One is the expense; another is that it takes 1-2 months for the drug to build up. And, as with all drugs, there can be side effects.

Another hallmark of therapy is allergy shots (immunotherapy), where the dog receives injections of the substance it is allergic to. The dog must first be tested. There are two types of testing to determine what substance to use. The “gold standard” is intradermal allergy testing, which, with a few changes for dogs (sedation, shaving some of the coat) is similar to the prick test in people. Usually this is performed by a board certified dermatologist. The “prick” is actually a shot under the skin, and the test involves forty to sixty different antigens. Any “prick” that produces a hive on the skin is considered a positive test.

An alternative is a blood test. There are numerous companies that offer these tests to any veterinarian, but not all laboratories generate quality results. It is important to realize that this is *not* a diagnostic test, but a way to determine what goes into the allergy shots. It is designed to “ask” the blood what it “thinks” the skin is allergic to. If used appropriately after the veterinarian has already eliminated other causes for the itch, it can be a useful tool in helping atopic dogs. About 70% of dogs will improve with shots. The amount of improvement can be anywhere from slight (the pet still needs some antihistamines) to significantly conclusive (no other therapy needed), but improvement may not be apparent for 4 to 12 months. The other advantage of allergy testing is that it reveals certain allergens that definitely must be avoided.

FOOD ALLERGY

FOOD ALLERGY IS LESS COMMON in dogs. It can occur at any age (less than 6 months to very old) and means that the pet has become allergic to something it eats on a regular basis. Dogs are not allergic to food they have not eaten (novel or new kinds of food); only exposure can lead to allergy. The signs can be similar to

atopic dermatitis, yet unlike some atopic pets, this is a year-round (not just pollen time of year) problem. That in itself can help distinguish the two allergies. There are no appropriate blood or skin tests for food allergy as in humans. A carefully performed food trial is the only way to diagnose this disorder. We all would like the easy way out—just a simple test—but that is not realistic. Food trials involve a change in life-style at home: no treats or snacks; no licking another dog’s bowl or lips; no eating fallen crumbs; no “cleaning up” of baby food flung to the floor; no trash-raiding. Even certain medications can ruin the trial and must be given in pill form only.

There are numerous foods these days at pet and feed stores which are promoted as products that help dogs with food allergies. That may be, but they are not appropriate at the food trial stage. In fact, the ideal food trial uses home-cooked diets consisting of a single, novel protein and novel starch (i.e., proteins and starches never eaten before) for 4-8 weeks. Cooking is not always easy, but there are several brands of prescription food designed for just this purpose. Picking a novel protein and starch source takes time, and listing the ingredients in all previously-eaten food and treats is essential in making the choice. This is also important when picking the commercial prescription food. These diets are available through licensed veterinarians only, so although pet store foods seem appropriate for the trial, they are not.

This is a complicated disorder; a great deal of communication between owner and veterinarian is essential to improve the pet’s quality of life.

After two months of a food trial, if the dog is less itchy or, better still, not itchy at all, then you can begin challenging with other ingredients previously fed. Through trial and error you will know which ingredient(s) can be eaten and tolerated. If the pet is no better, you and your vet can eliminate food allergy and conclude that atopic dermatitis may be the cause of your dog’s symptoms.

FOSTER MOM UPDATE

from Sherry DeFeo

BRANDI IS STILL GETTING her shots every other week; in addition she takes antihistamines plus steroids every other day. She will remain on her special duck and potato diet for life. Brandi has been so uncomfortable for so long that she has developed a compul-

sive disorder where she feels she *has* to scratch herself all the time. Summer is the worst time of year for her. She has to be shaved down and I increase her baths from once to several times a week. Her shampoos are expensive, but she needs them to get some relief. In addition, Dr. Rothstein has prescribed special creams and powders for her. Brandi is prone to developing bacterial infections from the allergies, and staying one step ahead is a challenge. Brandi will never be 100% free of these skin problems, but we do everything we can to keep her comfortable. When Brand is having a good day, she spends her time chasing sun spots and her shadow and barking at them. She's actually a funny, happy girl.

Editor's note: Brandi is a very high-maintenance cocker who will probably never will be adopted. Even if CSRNE had unlimited funds (which we don't), without Sherry's infinite patience and compassion, we would not have been able to help Brandi. Her devoted care is the priceless gift she gives to this little "allergy cocker."

More about allergies from Dr. Rothstein: For more information on allergies see Dr. Rothstein's accompanying article entitled "House Dust and House Dust Mite Allergy and Your Pet," on our web page. Simply click on "Helpful Articles" and look for them.