

Golden Retriever Rescue of Wisconsin, Inc.

Canine Allergy Primer

by Dr. Ron Beatty, DVM

There is no cure for canine allergies to molds, pollens or dust mites. Golden Retrievers may suffer even when we do our best to manage their allergies just as many allergic people do. Our goal is to lessen their itchiness so we can make them more comfortable.

First, we must make sure that there are not other common reasons for a Golden's discomfort. If this is a new problem with your dog, we need to first make sure that they don't have hormone imbalances, fleas or mange. Blood work needs to be done to rule-out thyroid and adrenal problems. A simple flea comb lets us check for fleas. Skin scrapings can check for mange. Once these problems are ruled-out we can move on to examine other possible causes for itchiness.

Above: Demodex mite found on a skin scraping.

When the above tests results are normal, a possible food allergy may be considered. Many people are under the impression that food allergies are really common but they're actually very uncommon in dogs. Another common myth is that lamb and rice food is hypo-allergenic. Not so! Years ago lamb was used in allergic dogs with success but this was because it was a new protein in dog diets. A second urban myth is that corn and meat by-products can cause allergies or that dogs commonly have allergies to these things. This idea is false. When dogs have a food allergy, the meat protein source seems to be the problem most of the time, as opposed to the grain source. The majority of dogs have been exposed to beef, chicken, fish or lamb in their food. So, we have to look for new proteins to try that they have not eaten like venison, duck, kangaroo, etc. I often recommend starting with Nature's Recipe Venison and Rice because you can get it at the pet supply stores. There are special prescription diets such as Science Diet Z/D or Eukanuba Fish and Potato from vets that may work well. A strict diet of the chosen food is done for two months to determine if a food works. Strict means no biscuits, people food, rawhide, other dog foods or treats. We often do several food trials until we throw in the towel regarding possible food allergies. In any case, although a food allergy is very unlikely, I still do food trials because there is a small chance that changing your dog's diet may help solve the problem.

If several strict dietary trials fail, we finally come to a diagnosis of canine atopy. This medical term means that a dog has an allergy to molds, pollens, dust mite waste or some other environmental allergen. Each dog has his own allergy cocktail or combination of allergens. So his allergies may be seasonal, all year, mild to severe or can vary from year to year. For example, ragweed is worse some years than others. I experience this personally! Environmental allergies usually begin at one to two years old in most Golden's and other dogs. Often, this is a hereditary condition that a dog gets it from his parents, grandparents or deeper in his family tree.

Does your dog constantly lick his feet? This is the cardinal sign of allergies. Dogs lick and bite their feet because of histamine release in their paw pads causing itching and burning. No, I'm not kidding! In contrast, we humans get runny, itchy eyes and noses. Also in dogs, allergies cause some histamine on the body skin, upsetting the harmonious balance of naturally growing yeast and bacteria. The overgrowth of these organisms leads to infections noted in the photos below. These infections are the really horrendous part of dog allergies. Sometimes the initial environmental allergen can be gone and now the infections are the main problem. The infections cause histamine release, as well. In any case, these infections must be treated because they cause severe itchiness or burning by themselves.

Treating the infections

I often sample organisms from my patient's skin or ears to diagnose if there is yeast and/or bacterial infection. This involves examining them under the microscope. Yeast and bacteria each require different medications for different lengths of treatment.

Ketoconazole

This is an oral medication used to kill yeast infections. Yeast cause severe itching and burning whether you're a person or a dog. The medication is costly and wonderfully effective. Yeast is a type of fungus and is much harder to kill than bacteria. Thus, the length of treatment is longer. If your dog has any vomiting or diarrhea while on this drug, stop this medication and call your vet. It can be a little rough on the GI tract (stomach and intestines) in some dogs. If GI problems occur, I usually stop the medication for a few days and then restart it at a more tolerable, lower dose.

Cephalexin or Clavamox

These are my favorite oral antibiotics that effectively kill bacterial skin infections. When a dog is on antibiotics they may have soft stool and may rarely vomit. If there is vomiting or diarrhea call your vet.

Otomax/Momentamax

These medications combat ear infections. They have worked well in my patients and in my own dogs. On rare occasions they may cause problems. In one case they caused head tilting and temporary deafness that resolved when the medication was stopped. If you see these signs, stop the medication and call your vet. These rare potential side effects are noted in medical literature and are due to the antibiotic Gentocin.

Medicated Shampoos

Shampoos kill bacteria and yeast on the outside of the dog. I don't like pet store medicated shampoos — I commonly see skin infections and rashes from these. I tell people to throw these shampoos away! Vets have medicated shampoos that are safe and really work. Don't use very warm or hot water. They steal the skin oils and leave the skin dry. Use lukewarm to cool water and rinse many times. Dogs with allergies have very sensitive skin so we need to remove any shampoo residue.

Keeping the infections away and your dog comfortable

Once the infections are cleared up, try and manage your dog's allergies to keep the infections from coming back. We have different ways to do this. The first four are often used together and do not have significant side effects.

1. Bathing. Dogs both inhale allergens and get them on their skin. We can't inhibit them from breathing but we can wash the allergen off the skin. We tailor the frequency of bathing to keep them feeling good. When allergy signs are bad, we can bathe once or twice a week. The use of fish oil, noted below will help skin stay supple and hydrated. Again, DO NOT use medicated pet store shampoos.

2. Antihistamines. They can work in some dogs. About 50% of dogs get some benefit from antihistamines but the other 50% percent get absolutely nothing. I like to do two-week trials with antihistamines starting with the old stand-by, Benadryl. If it doesn't work we can try other antihistamines. We must try several before giving up on these drugs. Dogs are like people in this regard. For example, Benadryl doesn't help my allergy suffering at all. Allegra helps somewhat. Claritin helps the most. I still suffer but just less. Less suffering is a good thing! You understand my point if you suffer from allergies too. The minor potential side effect to antihistamines is—you guessed it—sedation.

3. Fish Oil. Fish oils help in two different ways: they make skin healthier and resistant to allergy inflammation and they help make antihistamines more effective by better absorption after swallowing. The omega three and six fatty acids are the keys. Derm Caps and 3V Caps are great products. They come in gel caps and pump dispensers. There is a big difference in quality and fatty acid ratios among the brands available. Many dog foods now have these fatty acids but the drawback is that allergic dogs need much more than what is in these foods. Still, I recommend high quality foods with omega fatty acids. You are what you eat! I supplement my allergy patients using the noted products. Dogs must stay on these supplements during their allergy season, © GRRoW 2007. All materials and content are the property of Golden Retriever Rescue of Wisconsin, Inc. Copying and reproducing this information is not permitted without the written consent of Golden Retriever Rescue of Wisconsin, Inc.

however long that might be. There are no side effects to fish oils.

4. Otomax/Momentamax. Earlier I mentioned that allergies cause the harmonious balance of yeast and bacteria in the skin to change. The cortisone in these products helps soothe the skin allowing this balance to stay in place. Once we cure the initial infection, it crucial that you regularly watch your dog for head shaking and ear scratching—early signs that an infection is recurring! Some dogs require these medications in their ears once or twice a week during their allergy season to keep infection from starting. In other dogs, we just watch for ear scratching and head shaking, telling us that it's time to apply Otomax twice a day or Momentamax once daily for a few days to get the ear back to a healthy place. I have not had any patients develop bacterial resistance problems.

5. Corticosteroids (steroids). They work superb when a dog is really miserable—when mutilating their own body because of itchiness—and they work fast especially if injected. These medications can help break the cycle of foot licking and biting. The short-term side effects are drinking and peeing a lot. As a result, a dog on steroids will ask to go out to urinate more often. I always tell clients their dogs can't hold their urine for an eight-hour workday and should be let out at lunchtime. Steroids usually cause weight gain or lethargy, also. The body can easily recover well from short-term usage but not from long-term usage. Corticosteroids are recommended only for short-term use because they damage the liver if used 6-12 months or longer. So, if a dog has allergies the majority of the year, or all year, long then steroids are not a safe option.

6. Atopica (Cyclosporine). This is a very nice alternative to steroids. When owners experience the side effects of steroids in their pets and have dogs that need relief the majority of the year or all year long they really like this option. The dosage lessens over time. The goal is to gradually decrease the amount given to the lowest amount required to keep allergy signs away. Initially, its main draw back is the cost but that decreases after the first couple months. It does not have the side effects of steroids. It modulates the immune system so the body is not so hypersensitive to allergies.

7. Allergy shots. These are technically called hypo-sensitization shots or immuno-therapy. It is a last resort. This is used in dogs that are miserable year round with allergies. About 70% of dogs get some benefit from this therapy. It may take a year before we tell if the shots will help or not. The first year is expensive as it entails blood testing and more frequent shots—about \$1000. I've helped many dogs with allergy shots. There are many owners who are happy with the results of allergy shots.

That's it in a nutshell. Allergies are the bane of vets, clients and dogs. There is no cure. A dog with allergies is often on the verge of infections. We try to prevent those and keep the dog comfortable. It's all about management and it always requires time and work for both the owner and the vet. It's important to find a vet who has patience and takes time to get to know your dog's allergies. This problem will require communication and teamwork—it's not a one office visit deal. You and your vet will get to know your dog's allergy condition better and better after each year passes. Remember, the above therapies are always adjusted according to your dog's current needs. Allergies wax and wane during the year or from year to year, whether you're a person or a dog, so therapy adjustments are necessary. Along the way he may still get skin and ear infections that will need treatment. Overall, you and your vet can make your dog feel better and give him good quality of life.

Dr. Beatty cares for Golden Retrievers in Mequon, Wisconsin. After having a dog with severe atopy, canine allergies have become a special interest of Dr. Beatty's. mypetsvetmequon.com © 2006

About Dr. Beatty:

Dr. Beatty graduated from the University of Wisconsin Madison [School of Veterinary Medicine](#) in 2001. Veterinary school is just as difficult to enter and is equally as challenging as medical school. He focused on exotic pets as well as cats and dogs. In order to properly care for pets his education never stops. Dr. Beatty regularly attends [continuing education](#) events so he can learn new medical and surgical skills to benefit our patients.

Since graduation he has worked in the greater Milwaukee area. He enjoys seeing all companion animals-dogs, cats, birds, reptiles, rabbits, ferrets, chinchillas, guinea pigs, sugar gliders and other small mammals. His clients especially appreciate his gentle nature with their pets. Dr. Beatty is still amazed by the deep bond that people share with pets. One of his greatest joys in life is to care for animals.

In his free time, Dr. Beatty enjoys gardening, home handyman projects, going to the Menomonee Falls dog park, and reading.

