

Dietetic approach in the management of food allergy.

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The diagnosis and management of adverse reactions to food remain a challenge for the practitioner.

Specialists don't agree on the prevalence of this condition. For some it does not exist whilst for others food allergy represents up to 20 % of pruritic allergic dermatitis. Definitions also need to be clarified: one should only talk about "food allergy" for reproducible adverse reaction to food with an immunological basis. The clinical signs are variable and non-pathognomonic, ranging from a severe generalised non-seasonal pruritus, with self mutilation and secondary bacterial or yeast surinfection to sometimes a simple recurrent otitis or a mild pododermatitis. The response to steroids and antihistamine is usually poor. It is estimated that 13 % of dogs showing dermatological signs of food allergy also present digestive symptoms.

The pathophysiology of the adverse reactions to food remains poorly understood. The body has a natural defence system to protect itself against the development of food allergies: the digestion which breaks the proteins in smaller, non-antigenic fragments, the mucosa of the gastrointestinal tract that forms a physical barrier to the allergens and the GALT (Gut Associated Lymphoid System). Tolerance of food seems to be linked to the action of T-suppressor cells preventing over-reactivity. Any breakdown in those mechanisms can predispose the animal to food allergy.

The only reliable diagnostic method is the elimination diet. So far, neither a skin test nor a serology are valid tools for reaching an accurate diagnosis. After a detailed alimentary history, the veterinary surgeon must suggest a single novel source of protein and carbohydrate which will be fed to the pet for about 8 weeks. If the condition improves, the previous regime will be reintroduced and the symptoms should reoccur. The home made diet is difficult, time consuming, sometimes expensive and unbalanced.

The hydrolysed protein diet represents a valid alternative for the diagnosis and the long term treatment of food allergy because of its high digestibility, the small size of the polypeptides and the palatability of the food. It is also important to check the nutritional balance of the diet since it might be necessary to use it for growing dogs or pregnant bitches. The use of a hypoallergenic food should also be considered in cases of atopy, anal furunculosis, IBD and EPI.

Further reading:

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