

Diagnosis of Atopic Skin Disease

We suspect that your pet's skin disease is caused by a condition called Atopic Dermatitis or Atopy. This means that your pet has allergies that are manifested in skin disease (itching, rash, hair loss etc). The allergens that cause this can be things in the environment such as trees, grasses, weeds or mites, or can be in your pet's food. Unfortunately there is no simple test for atopy, and it can only be diagnosed by excluding the other most common causes of skin disease. Your vet may suggest the following tests:

Skin Scrapes/hair plucks/tape strips

Skin disease can be caused by a few different types of mites. The best way to rule this out is to take samples from the surface of the skin. Your vet will take some samples using a strip of sellotape, some by plucking some hair from your pet, and some by scraping the surface of the skin with a scalpel blade. This will make your pet's skin bleed slightly, but is usually very well tolerated. Usually these tests can be done conscious, but some pets (particularly if their skin is very sore) may need to be sedated.

Skin biopsies

Skin biopsies allow us to look at the cells that are causing your pet's skin disease. They can be useful to tell us the type of inflammation in the skin, and can rule out a type of mite that lives deeper in the skin, as well as some other more unusual diseases including immune mediated skin disease. Your pet will need a general anaesthetic to have skin biopsies taken.

Diet Trial

If your pet is allergic to the proteins in what they eat, this can cause skin disease. To assess whether this is a contributing factor to your pet's itchy skin, your vet may suggest an elimination diet trial. This can either be done with a novel protein diet or a hydrolysed diet. A novel protein diet is a diet that does not contain any proteins that your pet has ever eaten before. As most pet foods contain a mix of different proteins, it is often difficult to find a suitable diet, so a hydrolysed diet is usually the diet of choice. The proteins in a hydrolysed diet have been broken down into such small particles that the pet's immune system doesn't recognise them to react to. It is important that your pet eats only their elimination diet - they MUST NOT have treats or tit bits, or drink anything other than water.

Allergy Blood Tests

It is possible to do a blood test to see which environmental allergens your pet may be reacting to. This result of this blood test can be used if we decide to use immunotherapy to treat your pet. A positive result in this test does not necessarily confirm that your pet is atopic, but if atopy is confirmed in other ways, it can help us with treatment.