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VETERINARY
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FOOD ALLERGIES

If no fleas or flea debris are seen, aggressive flea control measures have been taken, and the cat is still plagued by itchy skin outbreaks, he should be evaluated for food allergies. These cats most often have scabby and / or crusty, ulcerative lesions around the head and neck. Concurrent gastric (stomach) and intestinal upsets are rare, but can be related. These outbreaks do not seem to be related to a specific season of the year. A food allergic cat is most likely to have a reaction to a food that it has been eating, because repeated exposures to the allergen are required for sensitization of the immune (defense) system. One study showed that over 80% of cats that manifest the signs of food allergies have been on the offending diet for one to two years or more. Changing to another cat food may not alleviate the signs, as many cat food contains the same ingredients.

A food test is used to diagnose food allergies. One feeds the cat a hypoallergenic (low allergy) diet and observes the skin for signs of improvements over a period of 4 weeks. Ingestion of other substances such as treats, houseplants, pet food or other animals, and human food remnants in dishes should be prevented. We sometimes also suggest that some cats drink distilled water rather than tap water. The hypoallergenic diet that the cat eats during the four week test period is called an elimination diet; i.e. it eliminates allergic foods.

Allergenic foods are not necessarily of low nutritional value; they are simply those foods that the allergic cat is hypersensitive to. These foods vary for each allergic cat, although some foods are more commonly implicated than others. Hypoallergenic diets are made with unusual ingredients, such as lamb, that the cat has not likely had prior exposure to.

Some cats respond within two to three days of the food test. The skin starts clearing and itching decreases. Other cats respond more slowly, over two or three weeks. No improvement indicates that the signs are probably not related to a food allergy.

Initially a corticosteroid may be necessary to control the itching and scabbing. This confuses the diagnosis in that it will be difficult to evaluate whether the initial improvement is due to the steroids alone or to the elimination diet. However, the skin would most likely remain clear if the hypoallergenic diet were helping. Some food allergic cats are refractory to corticosteroid therapy. This makes the search for non-allergenic foods even more necessary.