

FOOD ALLERGIES IN PETS



What is an Allergic Reaction?

The immune system is designed to protect the body from threats like bacteria and viruses. However, in an allergic reaction, the immune system mistakenly reacts to **harmless substances**, causing harm instead of protection. These are called **hypersensitivity reactions**.

In pets, food allergies are immune responses to certain **proteins** in the diet. These reactions can cause ongoing symptoms in the **skin, gastrointestinal (GI) tract**, or both.

How Do Food Allergies Develop?

Food allergies usually develop **over time**. A food that your pet has eaten for years without issue may suddenly trigger an allergic response. Scientists are still researching why this happens, but we know that **prolonged exposure** increases the risk.

Common Food Allergens

Most food allergens in dogs and cats are **proteins**, often from ingredients found in commercial pet food:

- Beef
- Chicken
- Fish
- Soy
- Wheat
- Corn

Even carbohydrates like rice, corn, and wheat can contain protein components that may trigger allergies.

Symptoms of Food Allergies

Symptoms may appear **hours or days** after eating the offending food and can persist as long as exposure continues. Common signs include:

Skin signs:

- Itching and scratching
- Hair loss
- Red, inflamed ears or frequent ear infections
- Chewing or licking paws

Gastrointestinal signs:

- Vomiting

- Diarrhoea
- Flatulence or abdominal discomfort

These signs can mimic other conditions, so food allergy is just **one possible cause**. Diagnosis often involves ruling out other issues.

Diagnosis: The Food Elimination Trial

There is **no reliable blood or skin test** to diagnose food allergies. The **gold standard** is a **strict dietary elimination trial** using a **hypoallergenic or novel protein diet**.

During this trial:

- Your pet is fed a diet that contains ingredients they have **never eaten before**, or a **hydrolysed diet** (where proteins are broken down so the immune system can't recognize them).
- The trial lasts **6–8 weeks**, or as advised by your veterinarian.
- **No other foods**, treats, flavoured medications, table scraps, or supplements can be given.
- If symptoms improve, your vet may recommend a **re-challenge** (reintroducing the old food) to confirm the allergy diagnosis.

Even **a single bite** of a treat or table scrap can reset the clock and invalidate the trial.

What is a Novel Protein or Hypoallergenic Diet?

A **novel protein diet** contains ingredients your pet has never eaten before, such as:

- Venison
- Duck
- Kangaroo
- Rabbit
- Potato, sweet potato, oats, or tapioca (as carbohydrate sources)

A **hydrolysed protein diet** contains proteins broken down into very small pieces to reduce immune reactivity. These diets are available as **prescription-only veterinary formulas**.

In some cases, a **home-cooked diet** may be recommended. These are typically unbalanced for long-term use but can be helpful for short trials.

Strict Compliance is Essential

For the trial to be successful:

- Do **not** feed your pet anything besides the prescribed diet
- **Avoid flavoured medications** or treats – check with your vet before giving any medications
- Store and handle the new diet carefully to avoid contamination

If your pet accidentally eats something off-diet, notify your veterinarian. The trial may need to be restarted.

What if My Pet Gets Better – Then Worse Again?

Some pets **develop new allergies** over time, even to ingredients in their hypoallergenic diet. If symptoms return after initial improvement, your vet may recommend trying a different protein source.

What Happens After the Trial?

If symptoms improve:

- Your vet may guide you in reintroducing previous foods to confirm the allergy
- A long-term maintenance diet will be chosen based on your pet's tolerance
- Ongoing monitoring is important to detect any new sensitivities early

Prognosis

While there is **no cure** for food allergies, symptoms can be **well managed** with a carefully selected diet. With proper compliance, many pets live **comfortable, symptom-free lives**.

Questions or Concerns?

We're here to help. If you have questions about your pet's diet, food trial options, or allergy management, please contact the clinic. Strict adherence to the food trial plan gives your pet the best chance of success.