



UW Veterinary Care
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

FOOD & SKIN DISEASE

“What’s the best thing to feed my pet with skin disease?”

This is a common question for pet owners to ask. It’s also a topic that creates a lot of myth and misinformation, especially on internet blogs and chat sites. Unfortunately, there is no “magic diet” that will help most pets with skin disease – though web sites, manufacturers, and pet stores are often quick to claim that such diets exist. Not to mention, they come at a premium price!

So what IS the best thing to feed?

In a nutshell, good nutrition. Aim for a high-quality, highly digestible, balanced diet with excellent protein sources. This does not have to be expensive – any national brand-name food purchased in a grocery store, pet store, or at your vet should be fine. Avoid less-expensive “store brands” or “bargain brands,” many of which may not have been tested with feeding trials to assure they provide balanced nutrition. Here are some of the most common myths and misunderstandings about commercial pet foods:

» **Grains are harmful to pets, and grain-free diets are better.**

This is currently the most common “dietary fad” for pets. There is simply no truth to this unproven statement; both meats and grains can be an important part of a balanced diet for pets. The same goes for “gluten-free” diets. Gluten sensitivity is extremely rare in pets, is limited to certain breeds, and mostly causes intestinal problems – not skin disease.

» **Specific ingredients in diets are helpful for skin disease.**

You will find many claims that ingredients such as zinc, antioxidants, coconut oil, herbs, fruit/vegetable extracts, “wild” meats, or high levels of vitamins will cure skin disease. Though any of these may be part of a balanced diet, none has been shown to specifically help skin conditions. There are less-common ingredients that may be included in some prescription pet foods, where there is some evidence that they help - especially in allergic disease. Talk with your veterinarian about the advisability of using these foods (which again, are typically costly).

» **Certain protein sources are better for pets with skin disease.** There is nothing inherently beneficial about feeding specific types of protein (rabbit, venison, duck, fish, etc.) to a pet with skin disease. The only exception here is for pets with food allergies, where alternate protein sources may be better tolerated – but in reality, this is not a common situation (see below). Importantly, studies have shown that “pet store brand” selected protein diets (like venison and potato, duck and sweet potato, etc.) are very often contaminated by small amounts of beef, chicken, soy, or other ingredients that are

not listed on the label. These may cause problems in a food-allergic pet.

» **“Raw diets” will cure skin disease.** There is no evidence that “raw diets” are beneficial for pets with skin disease. There is lots of evidence that points to the dangers of these diets – mainly, that they are frequently contaminated with harmful bacteria and parasites.

What about supplements?

For most pets on a high-quality balanced diet, supplements are not necessary. There are specific conditions, however, where they may be beneficial. The best example is fatty acid supplements, which can help some pets with allergies by lowering the amount of medication that needs to be used. This benefit occurs only with specific doses of specific fatty acids, and we find that some owners spend a lot of money to buy supplements that probably won’t help. Talk with your veterinarian about what might be better.

Could allergy to foods be part of my pet’s skin problem?

Your pet may be experiencing skin allergy symptoms relating to some ingredient in his/her diet, though this is not as common as many people believe. There are no good laboratory tests to detect allergies to food. Studies have shown that popular blood and saliva tests for food allergies are completely inaccurate; they are a real waste of money! Instead, detecting food allergy depends on feeding the pet a STRICT prescription diet for a trial period of 1-2 months, and seeing improvement. Most commonly, the allergy is to one of the common protein ingredients that are present in nearly all pet foods. In dogs, the most common allergy is beef; in cats, it is fish. Other possibilities in dogs and cats include chicken, soy, wheat, corn, milk, and many others. Animals are NOT allergic to colorings, preservatives, or other chemicals in foods.

What is special about the hypoallergenic test diets?

Because of the many different ingredients that pets can be allergic to, to test a pet for food allergy you must feed a prescription diet that contains only unusual protein and grain sources; or a diet made from more common ingredients that are specially processed to remove the offending allergens (this is called a “hydrolyzed diet”). The particular diet recommended by your veterinarian will depend on the situation. These diets are available as canned foods, as dry foods, and even as treats. It’s important to know that merely changing brands or flavors of food purchased at a grocery or pet store is NOT enough to test for food allergies.

CALL US 24/7

608.263.7600 | 1.800.386.8684 | uwveterinarycare.wisc.edu