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**Client Information Sheet**

## **Atopy**

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This leaflet is not intended to be a comprehensive text but to outline some of the different options available to treat atopic pets. Please ask your vet for more details.

Atopy is an inherited predisposition to allergies, like hay fever and eczema in people, which causes skin problems in animals.

An allergy is an abnormal response to things that normally occur in the environment. A substance capable of causing an allergy is called an 'Allergen'. These can be inhaled or absorbed through the skin or gut. Allergies are lifelong conditions that can be controlled but not cured and often a small amount of allergen can cause symptoms.

All animals have an itch threshold. Itchiness is additive. E.g. Atopy plus secondary infection plus external parasites produces marked itchiness.

If external parasites are controlled, the sum of the itch is less and the pet is more comfortable. If the itchiness falls below the itch threshold, the pet will stop scratching. The aim of adjunctive therapies is to use as many as are necessary to keep the itchiness below the itch threshold and minimise the dose of steroids required.

### Steroids

Most atopic pets will respond to steroids at varying doses. Even low doses over time can result in Iatrogenic Cushing's' - Excess thirst, enlarged liver, weight gain, muscle atrophy, recurrent infections, diabetes, etc.

However, 50% of atopic pets will require some degree of steroid therapy. Protocols will vary.

### Atopica

This is cyclosporine A. This is an immunosuppressive drug like steroids. The undesirable side effects most often seen are vomiting and diarrhoea. This is often transient and resolves within two weeks. Other side effects such as anorexia, gum overgrowth, ear swelling, change of coat colour and muscle cramps or weakness are observed infrequently and resolve if treatment is stopped. Infections must be cleared before Atopica is given. Initially it is given daily until a satisfactory improvement is seen, usually within 4 weeks, then every other day. Some animals may eventually only need Atopica every 3-4days eventually.

Most clients (80%) are pleased with the response to Atopica. Some dogs will not respond and therapy is discontinued at 8 weeks. As with steroids, ideally Atopica must be stopped for one week prior and after annual vaccination, otherwise immunity to the vaccine may be diminished.

Atopica is a good alternative to large doses of steroids for aged animals or where owners do not want immunotherapy or immunotherapy has failed. However Atopica is not cheap, please ask for an estimate for the size of your pet.

## Adjunctive Therapies:

### 1) Allergen Avoidance:

Not usually possible but some simple changes may help:

#### a) House Dust Mites

- Put a plastic house dust mite sheet cover over the pet's bed.
- Wash bedding in hot water >70°C
- Freeze bedding
- Vacuum cleaners with Hepa filtration systems.
- Dehumidifiers
- Steam cleaning
- Keep the pet out of carpeted rooms and do not allow on your beds and sofas
- Use 'Indorex' every 14 weeks (off label use)
- Use 'Fleaban' in the house (off label use)

#### b) Pollens

- Keep the pet inside at dawn, dusk and when the pollen forecast is high
- Avoid fields with long grass.
- Avoid cut grass and clippings
- Wash pet after going outside

#### c) Storage Mites

- Store dry diets in plastic containers with lids.
- Wash and dry containers between batches
- Do not feed the crumbs at the bottom of the box.

### 2) Immunotherapy

This requires identification of the allergens (pollens, mites, etc) to which the pet is allergic. These allergens are then injected into the pet in increasing amounts. This changes the pet's immune system and makes them less sensitive to these allergens. This is the treatment of choice for perennially affected pets. Your vet will inform you if this is suitable for your pet. About 40 – 50 % of pets will respond to immunotherapy and require little other adjunctive therapy. This means 50% of treated pets will require some other additional treatment i.e. Immunotherapy may reduce but not eliminate the need for other adjunctive therapies. A small percentage of allergic pets will not respond at all to immunotherapy.

Blood testing to identify allergens costs approximately £146 incVAT. Immunotherapy for up to 10 allergens costs approximately £189.84 incl VAT for 9 months (for Immunotherapy plus injection course).

Initially, injections are administered in the veterinary surgery. Please allow 30 minutes to wait in the surgery after injection to allow monitoring for side effects. As with any drug, there is a very small risk of reaction, signs of which include vomiting, diarrhoea, panting, collapse or sudden lumps over the body. A general increase in itchiness is normal during initiation or when starting a new batch of vaccine. If you latterly wish to give the injection at home, please do so between 8.30am and 5.00pm, when the surgery is open, keep the pet quiet for an hour following injection and avoid feeding during this time. A dosage schedule is included with the drug. The immunotherapy vial must be stored in the fridge and used needles and syringes returned to us for disposal. On average, it takes 6-9 months of therapy before improvement is seen. Long term side effects are minimal. Please reorder immunotherapy 8 weeks before finishing your vial because it takes time to order. Immunotherapy, if effective, will probably be required for life.

## 2) Diet

All atopic pets should be subject to a dietary trial of at least 8 weeks duration to screen for dietary sensitivity. This can be a home cooked diet consisting of a novel carbohydrate and a novel protein. A novel food is one which has never been fed before. Or can be a hydrolysed commercial diet e.g. Hills z/d ultra or royal canin hypoallergenic diets. These diets consist of protein molecules which are so small that they do not cause an 'allergic' response. Only water is provided for drinking. Generally, insurance companies will not cover the cost of prescription foods.

## 3) Shampooing

Many atopic dogs carry increased numbers of bacteria and yeasts on their skins, which alone is itchy. Shampooing regularly with 'Malaseb' will reduce these and thus reduce itchiness. Initially, bathe twice weekly, it may be possible to reduce the frequency of bathing later. Washing may also decrease the numbers of allergens 'attached' to the skin. Any atopic dog will benefit from bathing, as moisturising the skin reduces itchiness. Shampoos such as "Allermyl" can be helpful, if there are no increased numbers of bacteria and yeasts, as can the use of moisturising sprays such as "Humilac". Topical creams or gels such as Fuciderm, Viatop or aloe vera (with no tea tree) can also help in localised areas.

## 4) Essential oils (Polyunsaturated Fatty Acids (PUFAs))

These exert an anti-inflammatory effect and 'normalise' skin, especially if combined with antihistamines. There may be a lag phase of up to 8 weeks before the beneficial effects are shown. There are many versions available so please ask the vet or nurse.

## 5) Antihistamines

Antihistamines may successfully control 'itch' in a proportion of atopic pets. They show synergistic effects with PUFAs and steroids. There are several chemical groups of antihistamines, so failure with one does not imply that none will be effective and you are advised to try several. 'Tavegil', 'Atarax' and 'Piriton' are most useful.

Every effort must be made to suppress infection and inflammation for these drugs to have their preventative (not curative) effect, so this may necessitate a few weeks of antibiotics and steroids before they are used.

## 6) Ectoparasiticides

Atopic pets are predisposed to allergies to fleas and mites. Rigorous control is mandatory. Monthly treatment with 'Stronghold' is advised.

## 7) Secondary infections

Inflamed skin is hot and humid, which predisposes to secondary skin infection. Superficial infections require 3-4 weeks of antibiotics, whilst deeper infections require 6-8 weeks on average. Shorter courses increase the recurrence rate. Secondary skin infection is a common reason for a stable atopic pet to exhibit an increase in itchiness.

## 8) Phytopica.

Phytopica is a plant extract which has its origins in Chinese herbal medicine. It helps maintain a healthy immune system, supports white cell function and provides antioxidant benefits soothing an irritated skin. It is given in food and should show beneficial effects in 4-8 weeks.

Remember that every allergic pet is an individual, there is no one answer to controlling symptoms in all allergic pets. In most pets, significant improvement can be produced using the therapies outlined above but considerable motivation may be required to elicit the best results.

If you have any questions or problems, please do not hesitate to contact the practice on 01626 778882 or 01626 862020 or 01803 314940.

Preauthorisation forms for insured pets can be requested if you are unsure whether or not your pet insurance will cover the fees. Please speak to one of the veterinary nurses if you would like any further advice.



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