

Observations on life with an allergy dog

By Tom Francis never2old2weave@yahoo.com

Originally published in the Windy City Agility Club **Scramble** newsletter of July 2010

Issues that accompany an allergy dog can range from simple annoyance to heartbreak. Our experience has run the full gamut... and over the years several ideas have helped us to manage our dog's quality of life. Some are common knowledge, while others are our own "improvisations born of necessity". We share them here in hopes of helping others with allergy dogs.

Disclaimer: We are not medically trained, we are not experts, we are just dog owners who while trying to improve our dog's quality of life have kept track of things that have worked - at least for us. Past performance is no indication of future returns. Your mileage may vary. ☺

General observations:

- 1) Allergies are not cured... they are managed. Accept the fact that you have a task that you will need to attend to for the life of your dog... and that there are few constants. Conditions will vary with the seasons, diet, exercise, the amount of stress/excitement your dog is experiencing at the moment, and all can change as your dog ages.
- 2) Allergens can be things the dog comes in physical contact with, inhales, or ingests (food, treats, treasures found during walks). I am reminded of a cartoon that shows an owner explaining to his dog: "Yes, I know it is 100% organic... but it is also a dead squirrel!"
- 3) Allergens are cumulative and have a threshold level below which there are usually no outward manifestations. Once the cumulative factors exceed the threshold, the common allergy symptoms begin apparent. These include, in no particular order: watery eyes, licking, scratching, gnawing/nibbling their pads, feet or other parts of their body, decrease in energy or enthusiasm, and others.
- 4) The cumulative nature of allergies is what makes them very difficult to identify. For example, your dog's worst allergen may be present in your house year around... but other lesser allergens may not be present... so there are no outward signs. As seasons change, a few minor allergens are introduced, and the dog that was just below the threshold is now over the threshold and begins showing all the outward signs. The owner then goes on a chase of "what just changed" (minor allergens) while the biggest problem is the major allergen that was there year round. Example: Baby powder. What could be safer? The leading brand of baby powder is "100% pure corn starch". Corn allergies anyone?
- 5) An allergy panel performed by your vet or an allergy specialist can sometimes help identify and quantify the substances your dog is reacting to. These panels can easily cost \$800 to \$1000.
- 6) Diet can be a major factor, not only in your dog's allergies but in its total well being and strength of its immune system. The effect of diet can be evaluated on a trial and error basis or by using an allergy panel discussed above as a guide. Special diets range from simple limited ingredient diets to "raw" diets.
- 7) Lawn chemicals are all around us and can be a major problem. In fact, they ruined a vacation for us. We stopped at a gas station and saw that it actually had a large dog exercise area AND a fenced in play area... big enough for Frisbee and other games. How cool! However, something seemed odd, but I didn't know what it was until our dog, who lives for Frisbee, made two enthusiastic retrievals and then dropped the Frisbee and ran to the fence line and followed it to the nearest gate... she wanted out of the area as fast as possible. It was then that I noticed the grass. It was absolutely lush and beautiful - without a weed in site. The only way that happens at a commercial location is by massive use of lawn chemicals. Our dog ended up having to wear a

cone AND be under constant surveillance for the next 10 days - and we gave up on our vacation plans after two days – after driving 11 hours to our destination!

8) Besides allergens that a dog is exposed to, there are other factors that push a dog over a threshold. These include: becoming stressed or being excited about a person, toy or activity. It is common to see perfectly healthy dogs at the starting line of an agility run looking like a beast with an itchy infestation of "cooties"... but it is just the excitement of the moment pushing their allergy reactions over the threshold. Exhibit A: watch my dog at the next trial!

9) Physical pain or discomfort also plays a role. There is more and more being published in the literature about how even minor injuries, particularly to the spinal cord, can contribute to allergic reactions.

10) After all is said and done, the main issue often becomes protecting the dog from self inflicted wounds... which pose the threat of infection... which require antibiotics... which create another jolt for the dog's immune system, digestive tract and organs. Conversely, boosting your dogs immune system can aid in managing allergies.

With all that in mind, here are ideas we have adopted. The techniques we use at any given time, and how often, depends on the time of the year and severity of reactions.

A) Tea time anyone? If allergies make your dog inflict damage to their feet... keep your dog's feet clean and provide a refreshing rinse that takes their mind off the itching. We keep a container of strong chamomile tea in the refrigerator. When our dog comes in we first use a cool water rinse, followed by a soaking in the chamomile tea. The cold temperature delivers a welcome relief from the itching of her feet and also offers some medicinal benefits as well. Dry gently with a soft absorbent towel when done.

B) Instead of rinsing afterwards, consider using booties for your dog during the worst part of allergy season. We have done this for several years during the Nov-Dec mold season. Our dog has gotten to the point where she "knows" when molds counts are high...and will refuse to go out unless we put her booties on. She then quickly goes about her business and runs back inside.

C) While indoors, baby socks serve double duty. They provide a barrier from licking and chewing and also help prevent the dog from ingesting any meds that you may have applied to their feet. Secure loosely with vet wrap or Velcro strips. If you come into the room and you find the socks are wet, you know your dog has been at work... but at least there is minimal damage... and they have not licked off (and ingested) the meds.

D) Speaking of meds, natural Aloe can be very soothing. The problem is that most Aloe formulations found in drugstores have "added ingredients" and carry the label "if ingested, call the poison hot line immediately". Not a good idea for use with a dog. A much better alternative is an Aloe gel from a vitamin shop that is made for internal use. Still soothing went applied externally, but without the concerns if ingested.

E) Dandelions are desirable! A healthy batch of dandelions is a sign of a "natural" lawn without chemicals. However, if the dandelions appear twisted and wilted you can be sure the lawn has been recently treated chemicals. If the lawn looks "impeccable" - there is a strong probability that chemicals are used regularly used and this should be a "no-access" area for a dog that reacts badly. What do you do with your lawn? There are many "organic" - chemical free lawn treatment materials out there that may not give you that "impeccable" look but are certainly much better for your dog and the environment.

F) A cone, or Elizabethan collar, is not a welcome device, buy sometimes it is the only alternative.

Get one and keep it handy for times when you have to leave your dog home alone... or cannot otherwise monitor your dog's (mis)behavior.

G) There are alternatives to the traditional cone that may be more comfortable for your dog. These include inflatable and/or stiff neck braces that keep the dog from bending its neck to inflict damage. With any of the cone devices... keep it clean as it is in direct contact with the dog, and its saliva, for hours at a time.

H) A novel alternative to a cone is an audible signal device that indicates when your dog is actively chewing or licking. Sounds high-tech but our needs are met by a simple "Bear Bell". This is a bell used by backpackers to make noise on the trail to alert wildlife (especially selected large mammals) of their approach. The bell has a Velcro strap that attaches easily to a backpack (or dog collar). Any movement of the dog's neck rings the bell – allowing you to intervene before damage is done. Also, a dog that is going to do something "bad" will tend to wander off to another room. If we hear the bell sound fade into the distance... search and rescue efforts commence immediately. This works during the day and also while sleeping during the night... and is much easier on a dog and handler than coning or always maintaining visual contact. Bear bells can be found at serious camping stores like REI.

I) Drugs. While some drugs used in treating allergies are benign, others involve making a decision between quality of life and length of life...as these "miracle" drugs can be damaging to the internal organs of a dog. A trusted, up to date veterinarian is your best source of information on the available alternatives and their pros and cons. There are also numerous holistic and herbal approaches that can be very effective.

J) Is your dog experiencing any physical injury or discomfort? We periodically take our dog to a vet who performs a "nose to tail" checkup of her joints and muscles. She is able to apply orthopedic, massage, or chiropractic treatments depending on what she feels best for the various "dings" that she finds. I think "dings" are a way of life for agility dogs, no matter how healthy your dog appears to be. During one particularly bad allergy season, we took our dog for an exam... and for next several days... she was a different dog - from an *allergy* standpoint. The vet later confirmed that physical pain and discomfort can indeed be a "cumulative" factor in pushing a dog over their allergy threshold – and that "adjusting" the spine, in particular, can make a significant difference in reactions to allergies.

K) Keep a daily log during your dog's allergy season. With all the variables, a daily log is a valuable tool in sorting out all the ups and downs of your dog's reactions. Keeping track of diet, new treats, activities, places visited, meds, treatments, etc can all help improve your understanding and ability to manage the quality of your dogs live.

L) What is in the air? <http://www.aaaai.org/> tracks pollen and mold counts throughout the season. You can sign up for a daily report via email. Keep the daily info with your log book.

M) Is it allergies? Itchy, scratchy behavior can also be due to intestinal problems that are weakening your dog's natural immune system. The skin is the largest organ of the body. If an internal problem compromises the immune system, the symptoms can easily mimic allergy symptoms. One year, a breakout of what we thought were allergy issues, were actually intestinal problems. We realized this only after praying for snow for several months... but when it arrived, the symptoms which normally stopped as soon as we had snow cover... continued. We researched the archives of Whole Dog Journal (a great resource for canine health issues) which led us to the introduction of pro-biotics plus colostrum to our dog's diet, and a few other steps... and things cleared up in 48 hours. When spring rolled around we were back into true allergy issues... but at least we had several months free of scratching and itching.

N) ASK!!!! If you are associated with a dog club, long time members have seen it all and are a great resource for ideas and suggestions. You can get as many ideas as there are members... and you may find several that work for you and your dog.

Tom Francis

Note: Special thanks to Tilley Francis for helping us learn more about dog allergies than we ever wanted to know.