

Observations on Life with an Allergy Dog - Part II

By Tom Francis never2old2weave@yahoo.com

Originally published in the Windy City Agility Club *Scramble* newsletter of April 2013

Part I was published in the Scramble of July 2010. The same disclaimer applies to this article: I am not medically trained. I am just a dog owner who while trying to improve my dog's quality of life and have kept track of things that have worked for my dog. Past performance is no indication of future returns. Your mileage may vary. ☺

Having said that, my goal in writing is to hopefully, introduce some additional options for enhancing your dog's comfort and overall health with faced with allergy issues. The ideas suggested should not be initiated blindly. I researched each, looking for pros and cons, checking various references... and kept a log of observations, before, during and after these approaches were initiated. That brings us to the best place to start.

The most important resource person

When working with allergies you need to rely on someone who is familiar with your dog, knows their history, and can recognize those subtle and sometimes not so subtle, changes that indicate they are NDR (Not Doing Right). This person also should be responsible enough to realize that the changes they initiate can, and most likely will, affect both the short term and long term health of your dog – for better or worse. Fortunately, you can find the person best qualified for this task quite easily. Just go and look in the mirror.

No one else knows your dog better than you. Any specialists you enlist will see your dog no more than a few hours each year... if that. You can consult the experts, do as much individual research as you wish, and review the results of your research with the experts... then ultimately you have to decide.

Keeping of log of what you are doing... provides invaluable in seeing what works and if adjustments are needed... as well as preventing you from repeating something that did not work. A log was a key factor in my decision making process. It was not a detailed diary – which would have been better if time permitted – but it was just a calendar where observations were jotted down... and when greater detail was needed, I used a word processing document that I kept adding to.

Since Part I was written we have had some adventures that led us to switch our focus from external issues to internal issues... in particular, addressing the immune system as a whole. We chose this path as after watching Tilley suffer through the seasons, we were highly motivated (desperate?) to explore new options.

Threshold Theory

The Threshold Theory is discussed in Part I and, in summary, suggests that the outward manifestation of allergies is the result of cumulative issues, including: exposure to multiple allergens, existing

pain/discomfort levels (physical, mental, emotional), state of the immune system, nutritional needs specific to the dog, and the opportunities the dog has to flush toxins/pent up energy from the body e.g. exercise.

All of these factors could be present... but manifestations of allergic reactions will only show when the combined effects exceed the ability of the dog's immune system to deal with them. In human terms, you are more likely to get sick when you are eating poorly, sleeping less than you should, and have a terrible ache in your leg that you avoid tending to, and... because of your leg ache have avoided all forms of exercise for several weeks i.e. when your immune system is beaten down, bad things happen.

When allergies (which are just part of the equation) manifest themselves physically, we typically embark on a path of pills and topical treatments to treat the symptoms... while overlooking the state of immune system.

Part I discussed identifying and minimizing exposure to allergens that pushed a dog over the Threshold Level. In Part II of our experience, however, the guiding question became: "WHAT IF... we could manage the Threshold level itself? WHAT IF... we could remove some of the NON-allergen factors that are contributing to the Threshold being reached... or raise the Threshold level itself." That is the path of inquiry that a string of "adventures" with my dog led me to.

The Back Injury and Healing Oils.

Our dog incurred a back injury in June of 2010. We initiated a comprehensive series of treatments including: acupuncture massage, EM pulse Therapy, natural anti-inflammatories and muscle relaxants hot compresses, healing oils and a gradual regimen of stretching, flexibility and strengthening exercises. Throughout this process we were extremely thankful that her spring allergies wound down just about the same time as the injury... or so we thought. As the healing process progressed we began to increase the exercises and phase out the treatments until only healing oils and hot compresses remained. Within 48 hours after phasing out the healing oils and hot compresses... her allergies symptoms returned!? We restarted both... and the symptoms went away!? We stopped them... the symptoms returned. We restarted only the healing oils... the symptoms went away. No longer a coincidence... it was clear that the healing oils were effectively moderating her allergy symptoms. The healing oils were not a complete solution... but are now one of the items in our arsenal of treatments when allergy symptoms arise. We use a product called "Relieve It!" by YoungLiving.com. These are very potent and we apply only 3 drops, diluted with 3 drops of canola oil and gently massage it in at her withers i.e. where she cannot lick it. Is this aroma therapy? I have no idea. But it definitely moves the Threshold up... or reduces the impact of the cumulative factors causing the allergy symptoms.

The allergy that wasn't

One spring our dog began scratching at her flanks causing hair loss and surface wounds. This was a new symptom... but nothing surprised us anymore, and we assumed it was another manifestation of allergies. The vet recommended various brews of meds and topicals... most of which we avoided because either our log showed bad outcomes previously, or they were know to cause long term

damage. The allergist had a few ideas to try... with no impact. So we started praying for the ultimate cure for her allergies that had never failed us in the past: snowfall. Mind you this was now early July... so it was not a pretty summer and fall. Finally, the snow began to fall... and we had an early solid snow cover. Unfortunately, our dog's body "did not get the memo". The scratching continued... especially when excited. Can you image an agility dog charging from the starting line, doing the first two obstacles... then sitting down to scratch and scratch and scratch? That is how our trials were going that winter. Additional trips to the vet and allergist pointed to powerful steroids as our only option. Aside from that, they both advised "there is nothing else we can do."

Fortunately, the phrase "Nothing else we can do" has always inspired me. I began my own research into Whole Dog Journal for anything and everything to do with skin issues. By accident I stopped to look at one article on a condition called "leaky gut". I never heard the phrase before. It sounded weird, so out of curiosity I read it. All the pieces finally fit together! The article had several recommendations... we implemented them... and in 48 hours, our dog was scratch free and aside from the occasional casual scratch... and remained so until her normal allergy season that following August-November.

The short version is that leaky gut is a condition in which the bacteria in the digestive tract of the dog is out of balance, causing leakage through the walls of the digestive tract... compromising the entire immune system. There are many symptoms... but most commonly the largest organ of the body is affected – the skin. In our dogs case, the manifestation was her scratching herself bloody, which was different from her other allergy symptoms – but misinterpreted by us. By using the suggestions in the article we restored balance to, and strengthened, her immune system.

I was now an immune system issue enthusiast. When our dog exhibits "allergy" symptoms my first question now is: "Is this really an allergy issue?" For our dog, it meant that we have removed an issue that weakened her immune system... thus raising the bar of the Threshold another notch.

Vaccinations – a challenge to the immune system

When we originally brought our dog home from the shelter, we were earnest, well intentioned new dog owners determined to do the best for the newest member of the family. We followed our vet's recommendations on vaccines for the first six years of our dogs life... including combo shots "so much easier" said the vet, plus lymes, giardia, and the annual rabies shot. During that time I heard little snippets of information from other dog club members about "over vaccinating", but admit I didn't really take it to heart. "The allergy that wasn't" episode mentioned above now focused my attention on things that affect the immune system... and vaccines are designed to challenge the immune system.

Note: Vaccinating your dog is a serious issue for your dog's health. Investigate thoroughly before making any changes with your dog. The following describes our choices and is NOT a recommendation for anyone else.

Based on various sources, most importantly the vaccination protocol proposed by Dr. Jean Dodds we made the following changes to our adult dog (puppy protocols are different, see references):

Rabies shot changed from the 1 year shot to 3 year shot. Illinois allows both. The shot is the same. Only differences are the metal tag you get has a 3 instead of a 1, and the price your vet charges may differ. There are tests underway to extend the time period from 3 years to 5 and even 7 years.

Note: There are several rabies vaccines on the market. Only two are mercury free. Mercury is used as a preservative in vaccines. Its use in human vaccines was banned years ago, but the ban did not affect its use in animal vaccines.

Annual boosters were replaced by blood titers. A titer is a test of a blood sample that measures your dog's immunity. The last two years our dog's titers have all been positive (she showed immunity)... so we did not get the shots. Titers can be run for Distemper and Parvo... and only when titers are quantitatively low, would the shots be given.

There are two important reasons to perform titer tests:

- 1) If the results show your dog has immunity to the target pathogen, why give a shot designed to challenge the immune system? All vaccines have the possibility of side effects... and the possibility of a side effect can last up to a year after the shot.
- 2) If the results show your dog does not have a specific immunity, even though they previously were vaccinated for that immunity... they could be a non-responder. Some dogs do not respond to specific vaccines... and will not develop the desired immunity via a vaccination. A true non-responder will not develop immunity no matter how many boosters they are given. That means any exposure to the pathogen could be deadly... which is unwelcome knowledge, but better to know this issue exists than to mistakenly believe your dog has immunity. Meanwhile, continuing to give the shot continues the possibility of adverse side effects... without providing the benefit of immunity.

Note: Titers for Distemper and Parvo can vary widely in price from Vet to Vet. To get a reasonable baseline check the "Test Request Form" at Hemopet.org (Jean Dodds' organization).

Other vaccination schedules we evaluated:

Giardia – although we go up North for vacations, there are questions about its effectiveness, and its side effects. We stopped for now... will continue to monitor developments for this issue.

Lymes – see Giardia

The net result is a dramatic reduction in the challenges to our dog's immune system.

Food Sensitivity

Dr. Jean Dodds has launched a new food sensitivity test that is based on DNA testing. The test is simple, and rates your dog's sensitivity to various foods. Information can be found at www.nutriscan.com.

Food sensitivity is not exactly the same as an allergy... but it does affect the immune system of the dog. Reducing/removing the food from your dogs diet, takes away an issue that pushes your dog closer to the threshold.

Exercise and Treadmills

As an “only dog” our dog gets less casual exercise than the typical agility enthusiast household of 3 or more dogs. As an allergy dog, the days that we exercise her outdoors are limited – not to mention the challenging days of our Midwestern weather.

To address these concerns we decided to buy a treadmill. It turned out to be a great investment for many reasons:

- 1) Our dog can get a thorough workout regardless of outdoor conditions (sub-zero days, heat, rain, allergies).
- 2) On days when she is “on the edge” (starting to lick or chew her feet) I give her a treadmill workout. This flushes her body just as jogging does for humans... and leaves her in a pleasantly tired state. A tired dog does not scratch and lick and chew... she sleeps. Wonderful stuff and it beats wearing that nasty cone.
- 3) A dog should never be left unattended on a treadmill... but standing there watching gets old very quickly. So while she is on the treadmill, I do the exercises that I know I should be doing... so getting a treadmill for her, has been a great thing for me.
- 4) Although we were leery of spending the money for a treadmill, the reduction in vet and allergist bills allowed us to break even in about nine months... and we had a much happier dog.

Note: As we do for human exercise programs, you should review your dog’s medical history with your vet, or better yet, a canine rehab specialist before beginning any program. It is highly recommended that you follow a program provided by a dog rehab specialist to introduce your dog to a treadmill in a way that is both safe and fun for your dog.

By combining all of these steps we have made significant strides in improving our dog’s quality of life and well being. Her allergies are not “cured” but the issues are a fraction of what they used to be.

References:

Whole Dog Journal: May 2007 Canine Allergies and Your Dog’s Health

Dr Jean Dodds Vaccination Protocol: available from various sources on the web.