



# Food Allergies in Cats

## Cause

Up to 10% of all cats are genetically predisposed to develop food allergies. Beef, fish and dairy products are the most common ingredients to which cats are allergic. Clam juice, lamb and chicken have also been reported as common inciting causes.

## Clinical Features

Three distinct clinical patterns are seen with food allergies in cats.

1. Miliary dermatitis: Characterized by raised bumps with scabs anywhere on the cats body, usually accompanied by pruritus (itching).
2. Alopecia (hair loss) sometimes symmetrical and sometimes not. Often there are no skin lesions and owners do not notice excessive grooming or other signs of pruritus. Some of these cats are "closet groomers". They groom or chew out their hair, out of view of their owners.
3. Eosinophilic Granuloma Complex with oral or lip ulcers or raised ulcerated lesions anywhere on the body. The symptoms are typically present year-round but may be irregular as cat owners often rotate the flavor of their pets food. The average age of onset is 4-5 years, however almost half of the cats with food allergies will have signs by 2 years of age. Vomiting and/or diarrhea have been reported in up to 30% of cats with dermatologically manifested food allergies.

## Diagnosis

Before a food allergy can be diagnosed it is essential to rule out other causes of the symptoms including parasites, bacterial and fungal infections or immune mediated diseases.

**The gold standard for diagnosis of food allergy is a restrictive diet trial with a carbohydrate and a protein to which the cat has not been previously exposed.**

The trial diet must be individualized for each cat according to previous diet history. It is made with a novel protein such as pork, venison or rabbit that the cat has never eaten before. The protein is mixed in equal proportion with a novel carbohydrate such as potato (white, red or sweet) or jicama. They can be baked, boiled or microwaved, with or without the skin. An average cat will eat one half to one cup per day.

**It is essential that the cat gets no food other than the hypoallergenic diet during the food trial.**

Response to a diet trial (cessation of symptoms) may be rapid, gradual or not occur until late in the trial of 9-12 weeks duration. Cats should be house confined so they cannot get into other foodstuffs.

**Intradermal and serologic (blood) testing are "worthless" methodologies for diagnosis of food allergies!**

Confirmation of the food allergy is done by reintroduction of the original food stuffs and the reappearance of the clinical signs within 7-14 hours. Individual ingredient trials can be performed to isolate the specific causative ingredient(s).

## Management

Treatment of choice is avoidance of the offending allergen(s). The majority of food allergic cats

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can be maintained on one of the commercially available diets as long as it does not contain any of the ingredients to which the cat is allergic. 20-30% of all cats with food allergies will react adversely to and cannot be maintained on commercial hypoallergenic diets. These cats require home made diets. This reaction may be due to additives, contaminants or storage dust mites in cereal grains. Home-made diets must be balanced and supplemented with calcium, taurine, essential fatty acids, vitamins and minerals. Unfortunately 10-20% of food allergic cats may later on develop sensitivity to one of the components of the new diet. This will lead to recurrence of clinical symptoms.

## WHEAT RIDGE

3695 Kipling St., Wheat Ridge, CO 80033  
Tel 303-424-3325 ● Fax 303-420-8360

## WESTMINSTER

945 W 124th Av, Westminster, CO 80234  
Tel 303-424-3325 ● Fax 303-420-8360

## BOULDER

1658 30<sup>th</sup> ST, Boulder, CO 80301  
Tel 303-424-3325 ● Fax 303-420-8360