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Allergies can vex man's best friend during summer

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Is your dog chewing his paws, shaking his head or scratching excessively?

Chances are that man's -- and your -- best friend could be suffering from allergies.

Some local veterinarians say the number of appointments being made for dogs exhibiting allergy symptoms is off the charts this summer.

They lay part of the blame on the unrelenting heat and drought.

"I call it the summer crud," said Dr. Scott Mellina, who owns Mellina Animal Hospital in Fort Worth.

He said he has seen more cases than usual of itchy skin, conjunctivitis and swelling around the face. Fleas are also a problem this summer, he said.

"I don't have any scientific evidence to back this up, but I have always contended that there is more stuff in the air when it's dry, and I've wondered about the weeds that can survive almost anything," he said.

Summer allergies

Dr. Kirby Warren, a veterinarian at the Sanford Oaks Animal Clinic in Arlington, has also seen plenty of dogs with allergies. Texas is flat and windy, and pollen from weeds and grass travels far. Dogs walk through that pollen, he said.

"We see most allergies in warm weather," Warren said. "This is a really common problem. This area [North Texas] is considered to be one of the top allergy areas in the country."

Warren and Mellina said they haven't noticed an increase of allergy symptoms in cats, although they have seen flea problems, they said.

Dr. Adam Patterson, a veterinary dermatologist with the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, said he typically sees more animals with allergy symptoms during the warmer months.

He wasn't so certain, however, whether the drought is causing more allergies. But if a dog suffers mild allergy symptoms, the drought could make them worse.

"I don't think we are seeing an increase in allergies; people that have allergic dogs weren't recognizing the signs," Patterson said. "The big thing is to recognize that allergies are different in dogs than in people. Dogs have itchy skin, and in people, the eyes and nose are affected."

Treatment and tips

Dr. Janice Price, a member of the Texas Veterinary Medical Association, moved to Abilene after living in Flower Mound and Houston because of her asthma and allergies.

She said she is also concerned about seeing more dogs with allergies at the Windmill Animal Hospital where she practices.

The skin is the primary organ where allergies are found in dogs, she said.

"My personal take on this is that we've been in repetitive droughts," she said. "Plants that reproduce the most are weeds, and they produce an inordinate amount of pollen."

Price and other veterinarians say it is important to treat allergies case by case. Some dogs can improve with antihistamines or cortisone shots, but cortisone can affect the immune system, she said.

They offer some tips to help bring relief to dogs:

Bathe your dog frequently and use flea prevention. After your dog has been outside, use unscented baby wipes on the fur, legs and paws to remove pollen. And feed high-quality foods, as dogs need fatty acids for their skin.

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