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Janice W. Price, DVM
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ALLERGY MANAGEMENT IN THE MALTESE

All Maltese owners think their breed is the best in the world; being a Maltese person since 1968, I quite agree! However, we must be honest, and acknowledge that our tiny little mop-tops DO have some health issues to manage.

The most common skin/coat health problem encountered in Maltese is allergic skin disease. Unlike in people, the target organ of allergies in dogs is their skin. Allergic skin disease symptoms include itching, chewing, licking, redness, scabs, pimples, odor greasiness, staining of the coat, hair loss and heavy matting of the hair. (However, keep in mind secondary infections can complicate all of these symptoms.) Unfortunately, many Maltese start exhibiting allergic symptoms at an early age—even at less than a year. The proper diagnosis and management of these symptoms is crucial to keep your Maltese, as well as you, comfortable and happy.

Allergic skin disease in dogs is provoked by 3 general classes of stimuli, or allergens. Dogs can be allergic to:

- **AIRBORNE ALLERGENS:** pollen, dust, mold, dander in the air our pets breathe
- **FOOD ALLERGENS:** foods, additives, preservatives in the food our pets eat
- **INJECTED ALLERGENS:** bites/stings of insects, ticks and other critters who come into contact with our pets

Wow! That's a lengthy list of possibilities! Fortunately, allergic skin disease in dogs tends to have characteristic patterns, depending upon what the dog is allergic to. For example:

ATOPY:

airborne allergies (inhaled and absorbed through the skin)

generally (but not always) seasonal

commonly worst at night, early morning

itching/licking of feet, arm pits, groin,

underside of neck, sides, flanks

inflamed, draining eyes/puffy eyelids

inflamed/infected ears

usually responds to steroids, antihistamines

FOOD ALLERGY:

generally NOT seasonal, but continuous year-round

commonly first noted at 4-6 years of age, in pets who

have eaten the same diet for years

inflammation, dermatitis of groin and arm pits most

common, but can affect ALL areas of body

intense, unresponsive inflammation/infection of ears

also common

usually responds only transiently, if at all, to steroids

and antihistamines

INJECTED ALLERGIES:

seldom seen except when caused by fleas; other

causes are rare

fleas: severe itching, redness, hair loss over loins

and rump; groin, tail head and arm pits may also

be involved

pronounced dermatitis with crust, scabs, scales

wherever flea has bitten pet is common

complication

generally responds quickly to steroids, de-flea

treatment

one flea exposure can cause itching for 30 DAYS

POST-BITE!!

Diagnosis of allergies in your Maltese is based on the symptoms you have observed at home, your veterinarian's findings on physical examination, and the results of diagnostic testing. Health problems unrelated to allergies that can cause itching and dermatitis include mange (both Demodectic and Sarcoptic), hypothyroidism, hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing's Disease), secondary yeast/bacterial otitis, secondary yeast/bacterial dermatitis/folliculitis/furunculosis, essential fatty acid deficiency, sunburn, and autoimmune diseases.

I have noticed definite trends with Maltese allergies over the years. First of all, almost all Maltese are allergic to fleas. Secondly, a high percentage of Maltese have airborne allergies. In the warmer climates, these airborne allergies can first appear when the dog is only 6-12 months of age. Maltese airborne allergies tend to present with itchy, runny eyes, diligent chewing/licking of paws with staining of the fur, and prominent scratching of sides/flanks/neck/arm pits. Food allergies in Maltese are not unusual; common culprits are beef and corn products.

Managing your Maltese's allergies involves both oral and topical products. I have good success with many cases of allergies, whether simple or complicated by secondary infections, by combining eye drops, oral antihistamines, oral antibiotics, medicated shampoos, and topical sprays. Since so many Maltese are allergic to house dust, I always recommend that their owners have electrostatic air filters installed in the air conditioning system, and to get H.E.P.A. air filters. An additional, very easy and inexpensive strategy, is to wipe down your pet with nonscented baby wipes after every visit outside, to physically remove the airborne antigens from its coat.

With severe cases of airborne allergies, or nonspecific allergic skin disease that does not respond to the above medications, I will draw a sample of the dog's blood to be analyzed for allergic antibodies, called R.A.S.T. testing. R.A.S.T. testing is safe, fast, accurate, relatively inexpensive, and much kinder to the dog than allergic skin testing, such as is done with allergic people. R.A.S.T. test results can reveal not only specific airborne allergies, but also accurately identify the food groups the dog is reacting to. With this information, I can then formulate an allergen mix and start the dog on desensitization shots. Additionally, I can also choose a diet for the dog that does not contain the offending food groups he/she is reacting to.

Have you noticed one very popular item I have NOT listed as a regular tool I use in allergy management? Steroids! I do NOT use steroids for allergy management. Steroids, in my opinion, are appropriate ONLY where the pet is miserable and needs immediate relief. Steroids are not designed for long-term management of allergies; they are a TEMPORARY "band-aid" fix for the symptoms, contribute little to the diagnosis of the problem, and have a lengthy list of serious side effects.

In summation, if your Maltese exhibits some of the symptoms I have described, please work closely with your veterinarian to properly diagnose the problem, and safely manage the symptoms. We have a success rate in excess of 95% in managing allergies safely at Aladdin Animal Hospital. Since safe allergy management is based on fairly recently-developed diagnostic tests and medications, not EVERY veterinarian may be familiar with the protocol. Be prepared for multiple visits, lots of questions, and make sure your Maltese's allergies are diagnosed and managed, and not just temporarily hidden with steroids!