

Can Antihistamines Help My Itchy Westie?

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According to the Westie Health Survey found on the Orthopedic Foundation of Animals (OFA) website, www.offa.org, the most common health concerns in our beloved Westies are allergies and skin diseases. Allergic skin disease and atopic dermatitis (inhalant caused allergies) are the most common cause of Westies finding their way into rescue groups.

Anyone dealing with an itchy dog is most probably familiar with the use of corticosteroids to block the itch response. Steroids may be administered by injection, orally, and/or topically. Many veterinarians will also prescribe antihistamines to try to control the "itch" trying to avoid the clinical side effects of the steroids. Do antihistamines help?

Antihistamine therapy alone may be more helpful in patients with mild pruritus (itch) than in patients with severe pruritus. In patients with a predictable pattern of allergen exposure, antihistamines may not benefit allergic patients during an acute flare. Due to the prior release of histamine by mast cells, administering a histamine receptor antagonist/inverse agonist (hydroxyzine, diphenhydramine, chlorpheniramine) once the dog is symptomatic during an acute flare will not block the effect of histamine. However, antihistamines could be used prior to patient exposure to allergens to limit the effect of histamine in the allergic response. For example, an antihistamine could be started before pollen season in a pet

with seasonal pollen allergies and then continued until the allergen is no longer present in the environment.

There are different antihistamines available for use in dogs. The longest acting antihistamine is Cetirizine (Zyrtec®) and the dose is 0.5-1mg/kg every 24 hours. Chlorpheniramine is dosed at 0.4 mg/kg every 8 hours, diphenhydramine (Benadryl®) is dosed at 2.2mg/kg every 8 hours and Hydroxyzine at 2.2mg/kg every 8 hours. A clinical trial may be performed to evaluate efficacy in your dog by dosing for 2 weeks. If the response to one drug is not satisfactory, then the next may be tried.

Oclacitinib (Apoquel®), produced by Zoetis; is the newest treatment to "block the itch" and it became semi-available in early 2014. This drug inhibits the itch by blocking inflammatory cytokines in the brain. There are no steroid type effects and at this time few side effects have been seen. My patients have responded amazingly and the owners declare it "a miracle." The down side of this treatment is that it is sparingly available to the veterinarians. The demand for the product has been so extreme that Zoetis advises the practitioners that availability is limited until 2015.

In conclusion, remember that the "itch" can be caused by many things. Response to allergens is separate from "itch" due to bacterial or yeast infections and parasites. It is always best to seek the advice of your veterinarian on how best to treat "the itch."

