

Golden Health

Along with Warmer Weather, Sunshine

by Margo Biba

At our house, with 7 old Golden Retrievers, along with warmer weather come dreaded allergies...itching, sneezing, licking feet, ear infections. Golden Retrievers, with their sometimes delicate immune systems, are susceptible to allergy issues.

Like humans, dogs suffer from inhaled "atopic" allergies to tree pollens (cedar, oak, etc.), grass & weed pollens, molds, mildew and house dust mites. Atopic allergies generally first occur at 1 - 3 years of age, increasing throughout the dog's lifetime. After several years of acquiring new allergies, seasonal problems transition into year-round misery.

Allergy symptoms can be caused by many things besides inhaled allergies, including fleas, low thyroid, sensitivity to household products, and food allergies. Drug reactions, diseases, and infections can also cause scratching and hair loss. For this reason, if a normally non-itchy dog suddenly begins losing hair in patches and scratching himself, your first course of action ought to be making an appointment with your vet. Other symptoms may include chewing at feet, constant licking, and ear flaps may become red and hot. Chronic ear infections may follow. Skin becomes thickened, greasy and has a strong odor.

While considering the preferred treatment for your Golden's allergies, choose from a mix of traditional methods and alternative therapies. Your goal is making the dog's immune system stronger, while reducing the symptom—uncomfortable itchiness...

■ **Fatty acid supplementation.** Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty acids are useful in improving skin health. Omega-3 decreases inflammation and itchiness. Fish oil capsules test better than flax seed oil in reducing symptoms. One fish oil capsule, twice daily.

■ **Antihistamines.** The response to antihistamines varies in pets. Only through trial and error will you know which works best for your particular Golden. Benedryl containing 25 mg Diphenhydramine HCl (and nothing else!) is a popular choice. Hydroxyzine in 50 mg capsules, taken 2 or 3 times daily, is a more expensive but sometimes a much more effective alternative. Talk to your veterinarian about antihistamine options. For long-term use, antihistamines are preferable to corticosteroids (steroids) because they have fewer side effects.

■ **Shampoo Therapy.** Frequent bathing, even 2-3 times per week, can be soothing & helpful if a mild dog shampoo is used (oatmeal and hypoallergenic shampoo). Dog shampoos are specially formulated not to strip oil from the coat. Do not use tearless shampoo, as manufacturers use harsh chemicals to make it tearless. Rinse thoroughly. Bathing rinses out allergens in the coat that could be absorbed through the skin. Your vet can provide other shampoos if your Golden has secondary seborrhea or a secondary bacterial or fungal infection.

■ **Hyposensitization (allergy shots).** Once the specific sources of allergy are identified via testing, very small amounts of the antigen are injected weekly. This repeated dosing desensitizes the immune system over a period of 2 - 12 months or longer—but every dog is different. This is the most expensive form of treatment.

■ **Diet.** Feed your dog the best quality food available to reduce health & allergy problems. You do get what you pay for.

Poor quality dogfoods have been implicated as contributing factors in allergies, cancer and a host of other serious health issues.

■ **Reducing exposure to toxins.** Anything you can do to lessen the detoxifying burden placed on the dog's liver will help the dog in the long run.

■ **Acupuncture.** The goal is to restore the healthy flow of internal energy, known as chi—increasing circulation, reducing pain and inflammation by increasing the production and release of the body's own pain-killing, mood-elevating chemicals. Several Austin-area vets successfully practice doggy acupuncture.

■ **Local Honey.** Honey, taken daily, has anecdotally been mentioned for allergy relief. The key is procuring locally grown honey, so that the bees gather pollen from the same environment that produces symptoms for you & your Golden. Dosage is 1 teaspoon for your Golden.

■ **Acidophilus.** Given daily, probiotics like acidophilus battle yeast infections, which are typical for itchy skinned allergy sufferers. Acidophilus also helps maintain good gastro-intestinal health by promoting the "good bacteria" needed for proper digestion. Acidophilus can be found at health food stores & pharmacies. Yogurt contains acidophilus and can be effective if given in larger amounts, say, up to 1 cup per day per Golden.

■ **Antibiotics.** When secondary infections like staph or fungus (yeast) attack the skin, veterinarians often use antibiotics. Oral probiotics like acidophilus are helpful, both during & after antibiotics, to help beneficial bacteria killed by the antibiotics re-colonize in the dog's digestive tract.



Come Seasonal Allergies

■ **Nettle.** There are a number of theories that could explain nettle's success at treating allergies. Its histamine compounds may mimic or slow the release of histamines that are naturally produced by the body, or they may trigger an immune response that strengthens the system. Starting just before allergy season and continuing until just after allergy season, add one-half teaspoon of the dried herb to each cup of food at mealtime. Dried nettle is available at health food stores.

■ **Antioxidant supplements, including vitamin C and tons of garlic.** These supplements act as powerful antioxidants and help detoxify the body, necessary for any animal living in our stressful & polluted environment. Although dogs' bodies produce some vitamin C, a boost of 300 - 500 mg. per day with meals may help. Even better, add grated or steamed green veggies at every meal. (Do not include

green pepper if your dog suffers from arthritis or allergies, as it causes inflammation.) In addition to its antioxidant qualities, garlic helps to eliminate worms, strengthen digestion and beneficially stimulate the intestinal tract.

■ **Flea control (just in case).** Topical monthly treatments like Frontline or Advantage can be used up to every 3 weeks if flea infestation is a problem, according to veterinarians.

■ **Anti-inflammatories including, steroids.** Steroids work extremely well and quickly to relieve itchiness and pain, but have serious side effects. The negative side effects include decreasing the ability of wounds to heal & increasing the chance of infection. For arthritic pets, they contribute to further destruction of arthritic joints. At high doses, steroids suppress the body's immune system. Long term use affects nearly every organ, leading to serious damage to your pet's body. Steroids can

also have serious interactions with other prescription drugs. The bottom line: use steroids in the lowest possible dose, for the shortest possible time.

■ **Reiki.** A form of hands-on healing that heals the body first, then the mind, emotions & spirit. My own "Special Agent Cooper," age 14, suffered from severe allergies manifesting with extreme itchiness. Since adopting him in 2000, we've tried antihistamines, medicated shampoos, quality diet, 2 years of allergy shots, reducing exposure to toxins, antibiotics, flea control & steroids—all with only partial success. After one 30-minute Reiki session, with a 10-minute follow-up several weeks later, Cooper's itchiness stopped completely and we discontinued all antihistamines & allergy meds. There are many Reiki practitioners in the Austin - San Antonio area.

■ **Consult your veterinarian.** You and your vet are teammates, working toward the common goal of your Golden's comfort & health.

■ **Read up on the issue.** *The Allergy Solution for Dogs*, by Shawn Messonnier, DVM, uses the holistic approach to treating allergies. *Pet Allergies: Remedies for an Epidemic*, by Plechner, DVM & Zucker, explains why allergies are on the rise and what to do about them. *Protect Your Pet*, by Ann N. Martin, discusses the dangers of commercial pet foods and other health risks. *Whole Dog Journal* is the best—bar none—monthly newsletter guide to natural dog care and training. Check out their website at www.whole-dog-journal.com.

So as this spring time approaches, don't let your itchy dogs suffer any longer. If they are scratching excessively, take them to your vet right away. Try to find out what allergies they have and start treatment. Your Golden's will love you for it. 



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