

Nothing to Sneeze At

Whether you call them “hypoallergenic,” “limited ingredient” or something else entirely, dog foods that might avoid provoking an allergic reaction are big business.

BY LIZETT BOND

Food allergies and sensitivities are at the forefront of pet-owning consumer awareness these days, and when symptoms such as itching, scratching, poor coat quality or frequent ear infections are present, food ingredients often are looked to as the culprit.

“There are many benefits attributed to putting a dog on a hypoallergenic diet, including fewer digestive upsets, reduced licking and scratching, and less bloating,” said Adrian Pettyan, CEO and co-founder of Caru Pet Food in Vero Beach, Fla. “Pet parents are seeking these foods because they have received word-of-mouth, online or professional advice that a hypoallergenic diet might alleviate their dog’s condition.”

Moreover, due to the increasing number of options now available for allergy testing, both through veterinarians and retail-bought test kits, this insight is expanding, said Lucy Postins, CEO of The Honest Kitchen in San Diego.

Oftentimes, pet owners will work with their veterinarians to determine which particular protein, grain or ingredient is impacting their dog, said Chanda Leary-Coutu, senior manager, marketing communications for WellPet in Tewksbury, Mass.

However, prescription pet foods often contain ingredients considered by many to be inappropriate inclusions in the diets of dogs, said Lorin Grow, owner of Furry Face in Redlands, Calif.

“Many pet parents would



prefer to feed a natural pet food diet rather than a prescription allergy diet, and, as a result, there has been an increased demand for more natural limited-ingredient options,” Leary-Coutu said.

It is important to remember that food reactions often mimic other conditions, with flea or environmental allergies actually more common than food allergies, said Jennifer Adolphe, Ph.D., R.D., senior nutritionist for Petcurean Pet Nutrition in Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada.

“If pet parents suspect that their pet is suffering from food allergies, they should discuss with their vet the option of conducting a food elimination-challenge trial, which is considered

the ‘gold-standard’ for diagnosing food sensitivities, and a limited-ingredient diet is one option to do so,” Adolphe added.

Some consumers, whether their pets suffer from allergies or not, simply prefer to feed a simple diet with minimal ingredients and few or no “red flag” ingredients, such as wheat, corn and soy, which commonly trigger reactions, Postins said.

“These specialized diets represent the presence of the positive ingredients pet parents are seeking without the negative, or select, ingredients they are avoiding,” said Pete Brace, vice president of communications and pet parent relations for Merck Pet Care in Amarillo, Texas.



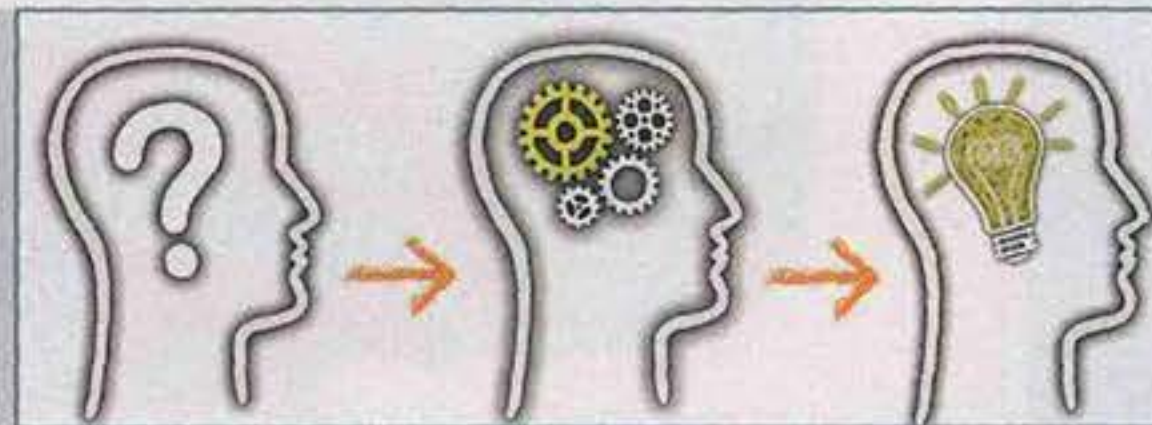
Foods considered to be hypoallergenic might help soothe skin issues in pets.

EDUCATING CONSUMERS ABOUT HYPOALLERGENIC DIETS

Retailers and manufacturers agreed that education is vital in recognizing sensitivities and assisting consumers with a solution.

Lucy Postins, CEO of The Honest Kitchen in San Diego, recommends retailers address allergy and sensitivity issues on an individual basis when assisting consumers in selecting a tolerable diet for their dog.

“We take a history of health and treatments and drugs previously used, recommend a sensitivities test, review the results upon receipt, write a diet plan, and possibly recommend holistic remedies and/or a visit to a true



holistic veterinarian,” said Lorin Grow, owner of Furry Face in Redlands, Calif.

At TailsSpin Pet Food & Accessories, which has several locations in Georgia, staff members complete online workshops, such as Pet Store Pro, and attend in-store seminars provided by manufacturers and local veterinarians. These workshops are conducted during business hours and are open to customers as well, said Jusak Yang Bernhard,

Identifying allergens can be a very time-consuming and frustrating process, but the consumer must be organized and systematic in conducting food trials to identify allergic reaction triggers, said Jerel Kwek, co-founder and CEO of Kent, Wash.-based Addiction Foods.

“Although the initial allergic reaction might happen quickly, it might take 12 weeks or more for a pet to respond to a hypoallergenic diet,” Kwek added.

co-owner.

“These outreach efforts are important to enhance our culture and encourage better relations and camaraderie between staff, vendors and customers,” Bernhard said.

PROMOTING AND DISPLAYING HYPOALLERGENIC FOODS

Because food allergies differ with individual pets, Jusak Yang Bernhard, co-owner of TailsSpin Pet Food & Accessories, which has several stores in Georgia, noted that a full return policy is offered on all pet foods carried at TailsSpin.

"We also try to educate our customers regarding a rotational diet," Bernhard said.

Understanding the ingredient panel is another key to assisting pet owners in making a dietary decision for their dog, said Pete Brace, vice president of communications and pet parent relations for Merrick Pet Care in Amarillo, Texas.

"Pet parents want to know exactly what's in the recipe as well as which ingredients are not," Brace said. "At Merrick, we include a table outlining what the recipe does and does not include, as well as easy-to-read icons demonstrating recipe benefits."

Merchandising limited-ingredient, hypoallergenic diets and related products, such as allergy test kits, in one location is helpful in supporting consumers in the search for solutions, said Lucy Postins, CEO of The Honest Kitchen in San Diego.

"Typically we suggest that a store takes in our POP display, which we call our Allergy Solutions Center, and merchandise our food as a problem-solving product for pets with allergies," said Lonnie Schwimmer, president of Koha Pet Food, formerly known as Mauri Pet Food, in Delray Beach, Fla.



HYPOALLERGENIC PET FOOD: A MATTER OF OPINION

Merriam-Webster defines "hypoallergenic" as "having little likelihood of causing an allergic response." However, the designation is open to interpretation.

Through marketing and ad placements, there is plenty of misleading information out there for pet owners trying to choose the right food for a pet with allergies, said Jusak Yang Bernhard, co-owner of TailsSpin Pet Food & Accessories, which has several locations in Georgia. TailsSpin opened its doors in 2007 due to a lack of hypoallergenic foods available in the area, he said.

"We took a bold step in carrying only pet foods containing no corn, wheat, soy or byproducts, as we believe these are cheap fillers and culprits to allergies in pets," he said. "For us, ridding the obvious offenders is a wonderful start."

Bernhard added that according to Huffington Post's "Top 7 Genetically Modified Crops," written by Margie Kelly, corn and soy top the list.

"These genetically modified ingredients contain pesticide that cannot be washed off," he said.

However, while it is possible to eliminate egregious ingredients, the term "hypoallergenic" itself is misleading, said Lorin Grow, owner of Furry Face in Redlands, Calif.

"There is no such thing as 'hypoallergenic,'" Grow said. "Every living being is different, and sensitivities and intolerances can vary substantially."

"Hypoallergenic" really is a misnomer," agreed Lucy Postins, CEO of The Honest Kitchen in San Diego. "For example, a 'hypoallergenic' diet made with turkey is not a solution for a dog with poultry allergies."

Because fewer total ingredients mean less chance of a problematic element being included in a formulation, limited-ingredient diets make it easier for a consumer to find a diet that their pet can tolerate, Postins added.



Likewise, while limited- and novel-ingredient foods reduce the likelihood of an adverse food reaction, they are not termed "hypoallergenic" but are another option for pets with food sensitivities, said Jennifer Adolphe, Ph.D., R.D., senior nutritionist for Petcurean Pet Nutrition in Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada.

However, the terms "hypoallergenic" and "limited ingredient" are sometimes used interchangeably when describing pet foods, said Chanda Leary-Coutu, senior manager, marketing communications for WellPet in Tewksbury, Mass.

"I consider 'hypoallergenic' and 'limited-ingredient' diets to be the same thing," said Sherry Redwine, co-owner of Odyssey Pets in Dallas. "If a dog has severe allergies, I'll suggest this type of diet."

"At Caru, we concur with the definition presented by Dog Food Advisor that a hypoallergenic dog food is designed to avoid the use of ingredients most likely to provoke an allergic reaction," said Adrian Pettyan, CEO and co-founder of Vero Beach, Fla.-based Caru Pet Food.

NEW HYPO-ALLERGENIC OPTIONS

The definition of "hypoallergenic" dog food varies within the industry, said Lonnie Schwimmer, president of Koha Pet Food, formerly known as Mauri Pet Food, in Delray Beach, Fla.

"At Koha, we focus on providing pet owners with novel or alternative proteins in our recipes, then eliminate supporting ingredients that have been historically determined to give pets health issues," he said.

Koha Pet Food's novel protein line was created for pets experiencing allergies to basic proteins, such as chicken, he added.

"By providing a novel protein like kangaroo or goat, pets are given an option they most likely never [have eaten]," Schwimmer said.

Canine Caviar's new Open Range Holistic Grain Free Entrée offers buffalo as an alternative protein. The company recommends protein rotation, which gives dogs a different amino acid profile and helps maintain a healthy immune system, said Jeff Baker, owner of Canine Caviar in Norco, Calif. The Canine Caviar limited-ingredient diets offer a single protein and single complex carbohydrate, allowing for easier digestion and decreasing the chance of an allergic reaction, Baker added.

While a hypoallergenic recipe uses only one protein source, resulting in a lower chance for the animal to suffer an allergic reaction, a limited-ingredient recipe also contains one protein source, said Chanda Leary-Coutu, senior manager, marketing communications for WellPet in Tewksbury, Mass. However, with fewer overall primary ingredients, the chance the dog will experience food sensitivities is lessened, she added.

WellPet's Wellness brand recently introduced new limited-ingredient products intended for use as a complete, balanced meal or a meal complement, Leary-Coutu said.

"Wellness TruFood Meal Complements for dogs contain five ingredients or less and can be served as a tasty snack or delicious food topper," she said.

Wellness' new Core 95% offers single-protein, limited-ingredient wet recipes that can be served as a protein-packed meal topper or alone as a complete wet food meal, Leary-Coutu said.

"The ingredients in Core 95% are limited to a high-quality protein source and superfoods such as broccoli or spinach, and include the vitamins and minerals needed for a balanced meal," she said.

Petcurean Pet Nutrition's recently introduced Go! Sensitivity + Shine Limited Ingredient Diets in Duck, Salmon and Venison recipes are ideal for all

dogs, and particularly those with food sensitivities, said Jennifer Adolphe, Ph.D., R.D., senior nutritionist for the Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada, company. These diets were created to provide a single-source meat protein with as few ingredients as possible while meeting nutritional requirements, she added.

"Petcurean has carefully selected novel protein and carbohydrate ingredients for these recipes, since pets are less likely to experience an adverse food reaction to

ingredients to which they have not been previously exposed," Adolphe said.

The Honest Kitchen's new Minimalist line contains limited-ingredient diets formulated using six whole food ingredients plus vitamins and minerals, said Lucy Postins, CEO of The Honest Kitchen in San Diego.

"We worked with our consumers, as well as two food allergy testing labs, to better understand the pet food ingredients that most commonly trigger allergic reactions in pets, and then purposely avoided

them in the creation of our Minimalist line," Postins said.

In April, The Honest Kitchen also launched Proper Toppers nationwide. The kibble mix-ins are formulated with 90 percent meat and just five ingredients, allowing pet owners to incorporate variety into the diet without a complex ingredient panel. The gently dehydrated, human-grade Turkey and Chicken recipes also include apples, blueberry, chard and pumpkin, Postins said.

Merrick Pet Care introduced its Limited Ingredient Diet for dogs in 2015. The recipes are formulated using a single source of animal protein, and they are grain, corn and soy free, said Pete Brace, vice president of communications and pet parent relations for Merrick Pet Care in Amarillo, Texas.

"These dry and canned recipes keep it simple, with complete and balanced nutrition from a single source of animal protein and the fewest, most essential natural ingredients for pets with food sensitivities," Brace said.