Food Elimination Protocol

Many people think that a “food elimination” trial is when you switch your dog to a product that doesn’t contain some of the ingredients that dogs are supposedly more frequently allergic to, such as wheat or soy. (The fact is, there are not any definitive studies that identify the “most common dietary allergens.”) Some food manufacturers bolster this misconception when they refer to their products as “anti-allergenic” or boast about their product’s lack of ingredients X, Y, and Z.

Actually, in a properly conducted “food elimination” trial, you eliminate practically all food, reducing your dog’s diet to nothing more than a single protein source (preferably a “novel” protein – one he has never had before, such as buffalo, rabbit, kangaroo, etc.) and a single carbohydrate; again, it’s preferable to use a food he’s never had before, such as quinoa or amaranth. For a number of weeks, you feed your dog this stripped-down diet and NOTHING but this diet – no treats, snacks, scraps, or anything else that’s not those two ingredients, except, perhaps, a vitamin/mineral supplement. You do this under the supervision of your veterinarian, who will monitor your dog’s health on this restricted diet, and help you evaluate your dog’s reaction (or lack thereof) to the new diet.

In the best case scenario, in two or three weeks, your dog’s symptoms of allergy begin to subside. He starts to sleep better. His hot spots heal, and then a little hair begins to grow back. You’ve found two foods he’s not allergic to (at least, not yet) – hurray! Then, you add one more ingredient to his diet, say, another protein. You wait a fortnight or more, and if his symptoms stay in remission, you can mark the newest ingredient down in your dog’s health diary as “safe.” In this extremely slow, careful way, you add one ingredient at a time, watching your dog continually for a recurrence of his allergic symptoms, which would implicate the most recent addition to his diet as the allergenic culprit. Simple, right?

Well, in theory. Because in the worst case scenario, it turns out that your dog is allergic to one of the first two (or both) ingredients you selected, and he does not improve at all on the highly restricted diet, and you have to select two new novel ingredients before you find something he’s not allergic to. And if this goes on for some time, he’s either a) unbeknownst to you, eating something that you’re not giving him, say, the cat’s food; or b) he’s allergic to something in his environment, not his diet.

In another complex (but common) scenario, it turns out that he’s allergic to half a dozen or more foods. Or, you find a commercial food that contains none of the ingredients he’s allergic to, and you feed him nothing but that product for the next three years . . . and then he develops an allergy to the protein in that food. So, while a true food elimination trial can be incredibly helpful and ultimately diagnostic, it might also be more costly, difficult to manage, or time-consuming than some owners can handle.

In this case, a modified and much less strict version can be used. One could try switching to a commercial food that contains as few ingredients as possible, especially if you are feeding a product that contains several different proteins and a bunch of carbohydrate sources, such as Natura’s Innova, which contains turkey, chicken, herring, cottage cheese, and egg, as well as barley, two kinds of rice, and potatoes.

Look for a food that contains protein and carbohydrate sources that your dog has not eaten before. Several manufacturers call the formulas that meet this description their “allergy foods” – but one should not be fooled into thinking that these foods are somehow anti-allergenic. Your dog will have an allergic reaction to a fish-and-potato “allergy” food if he’s allergic to fish and/or potatoes. However, there are some foods on the market that just happen to be comprised of a relatively few ingredients, such as Natura’s California Natural (mostly rice, with either lamb or chicken).

Another alternative is to seek out a food that contains none of the proteins or carbohydrates sources that your dog has had before. Years ago, my dog Rupert suffered with terrible allergies as I switched him from one food to another, and even a raw, home-prepared diet. By chance, after about two years of switching from food to food, I found a product that he could eat without itching. It happened to be a beef- and barley-based diet. I went back through all my notes, and to my horror, realized that all seven or eight diets I had fed him – including the raw food – contained chicken. This ultimately proved to be the one ingredient to which he was reactive.

This experience underlined to me the absolute necessity of maintaining a health journal for each dog, with changes of diet and symptoms noted regularly.

– Nancy Kerns