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Omega Fatty Acids Provide Relief for Allergic Pets

Author: Kim Marie Labak

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For several years, omega fatty acids have been in the natural medicine limelight for reducing excessive inflammation associated with allergies and arthritis. However, Dr. Karen Campbell, veterinary dermatologist at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Urbana, notes that there are different types of omega fatty acids, specifically omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids, and distinctions between these must be understood when considering fatty acid supplementation.

Omega-6 fatty acids are "essential" nutrients for most mammals, meaning that they are required for basic biochemical functions. Since the body cannot produce them, they must be acquired through the diet. They are commonly found in vegetable oils such as sunflower, safflower, soybean, and corn oil—oils that, as Dr. Campbell explains, come from terrestrial sources. These fats are directly involved in maintenance of normal, healthy skin.

A specific omega-6 known as linoleic acid acts as a mortar between skin cells, maintaining skin strength and preventing moisture from evaporating. Linoleic acid, a common ingredient in premium pet foods, helps promote a shiny, healthy coat and prevents dry, scaly skin.

Unfortunately, omega-6 fatty acid can also exacerbate inflammatory allergic reactions. Omega-6 fatty acids are transformed by the body to produce eicosanoids, biochemicals that contribute to inflammation. In animals with allergies, omega-6 fatty acids can actually fuel inflammation by providing the building blocks for excessive amounts of eicosanoids.

Fortunately, another family of omega fatty acids, omega-3 fatty acids, can help balance the body's inflammatory response. Since eicosanoids produced from omega-3 fatty acids are much less inflammatory, keeping this class of fatty acids available in the bloodstream can actually reduce inflammation.

"The metabolic process prefers omega-3 fatty acids, so the body will use them first to produce the less inflammatory eicosanoids," says Dr. Campbell, explaining why omega-3s work.

Omega-3 fatty acids are found in fish and flaxseed oils. However, these foods are less common in diets than is soy or corn, so most animals (including humans) typically consume lower amounts of omega-3 fatty acids. Supplementation can help provide these oils, which may also be essential for brain development in infants and other young animals.

According to Dr. Campbell, both omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids are important for allergic pets. "Omega-6 fatty acids keep the skin hydrated and help create a protective barrier against absorbing allergens, while omega-3 fatty acids can minimize inflammation caused by allergens." However, she sometimes prescribes only omega-3 fatty acids to itchy pets if they already get plenty of omega-6 fatty acids in their diet.

Dr. Campbell also explains that omega-3 fatty acids can help reduce inflammation in many conditions besides allergies, including arthritis and kidney disease.

Several types of omega-3 fatty acid supplements are available from your veterinarian or local health food store in liquid or capsule form. Many veterinary preparations also contain vitamins B and E, which help certain species utilize fatty acids better.

For more information about the benefits of fatty acid supplementation, contact your veterinarian.

Veterinary Extension/Office of Public Engagement
University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine
217/333-2907

Source: Dr. Karen Campbell

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