THE ITCHY DOG
Short- & Long-Term Approaches to Allergy

A recent survey of veterinarians revealed mixed results regarding current trends in diagnosis and treatment of atopic dermatitis (AD) in dogs.

The good news is that newer antipruritics (eg, oclacitinib, lokivetmab) are improving patient comfort and changing the way more than three-quarters (78.7%) of veterinarians are diagnosing, managing, and treating atopic dogs.1

The survey also revealed bad news, however—when atopy is suspected in a patient, nearly half of veterinarians (46%) are not recommending the gold-standard therapy: allergen-specific immunotherapy (ASIT).1 Many respondents described recommending either antipruritics or ASIT.1

Luckily, veterinarians do not have to choose one or the other. Follow this step-by-step guide to provide both rapid relief of signs and the most appropriate long-term control of this condition.

The Best Of Both Worlds in 4 Steps

STEP 1 Use antipruritics to make patients comfortable in the short-term.
Surveyed practitioners most commonly cited the “quick fix,” noting that newer antipruritics allowed them to change clinical approaches to atopy.1 These medications quickly provide relief and comfort for pets without the concerns for side effects associated with long-term steroid use.1

This data is consistent with sponsored studies that find oclacitinib is as or more efficacious than prednisolone3 and cyclosporine.4 Since the release of oclacitinib in 20145 and lokivetmab in 2016,6 a mix of sponsored studies3,7,8 and independent guidelines9 have thus far concluded these products appear safe.

STEP 2 Recommend gold-standard therapy, highlighting the long-term health and cost benefits of ASIT.
A Chance for a Better Life
AD is a lifelong disease10 that can worsen over time.11,12 ASIT is the only therapy that:

- Can prevent signs13
- May change the course of disease11
- Occasionally leads to remission10,14
- May decrease the number of new sensitizations15

ASIT is especially important in young patients and patients with non-seasonal signs.11 Even if therapy does not result in complete control or remission, practitioners might still be able to prescribe fewer drugs for these patients.12
Medications Have Risks
Many veterinarians prefer to treat underlying conditions and not just the patient’s clinical signs—and for good reason, as nearly all treatment options have challenges, contraindications, precautions, and the potential for adverse events. For antipruritic therapies, some of these include:

- **Both oclacitinib and lokivetmab**
  - Not indicated in pregnant, breeding, or lactating animals
- **Oclacitinib**
  - Requires oral administration
  - Not for use in patients under 12 months of age
  - Has not been evaluated for concurrent use with immunosuppressants (eg, glucocorticoids, cyclosporine)
- **Lokivetmab**
  - Variable length of effect
  - Questionable how much of the target (interleukin-31) is in the skin or serum of atopic dogs
  - Duration of action may shorten with seasonally worse clinical signs

Lower Long-Term Costs
Approximately 25% of veterinarians in the recent study cited cost as the primary factor preventing them from recommending ASIT; 78.9% of respondents felt cost was the primary reason clients were reluctant to pursue this method of treatment. ASIT may be less expensive in the long run, however, especially if it slows the course of disease over time or decreases the expense of treating flare-ups or using other medications. The success of more expensive therapies (eg, lokivetmab) may indicate that despite cost, clients are willing to pay to ensure their pet is comfortable.

Products like pet insurance or wellness plans increase client spending, likely because these options make it possible for them to split costs into more payments. Consider creating allergy care packages that help clients adjust their payment schedule and the timing of testing and treatment while antipruritic therapy helps keep patients comfortable (see Allergy Care Packages).

Perform dermatologic testing on patients while they are on antipruritics. Luckily, practitioners do not have to choose between treating patients’ discomfort and determining a pet’s sensitivities. Patients do not have to be taken off either oclacitinib or lokivetmab before allergy testing.

It is important to note that response to treatment with oclacitinib or lokivetmab does not constitute a diagnosis for AD. Guidelines from the International Task Force on Canine Atopic Dermatitis note that if AD is suspected and the pet is nonresponsive to glucocorticoids or oclacitinib then complicating factors or alternative diagnoses should be considered. The reverse is not true, however. Positive response to oclacitinib does not translate to an AD diagnosis when the cause of the patient’s pruritus is unclear.

Oclacitinib is FDA-approved for the control of pruritus caused not only by atopic dermatitis but also flea allergies. Extra-label uses to treat other pruritic dermatopathies are being explored. A dermatology roundtable sponsored by Zoetis highlights the importance of ruling out other causes of itch when using these products.
may already be using antipruritics concurrently while they start ASIT.

There are already recommendations noting that oclacitinib can be used to provide relief in the early stages of immunotherapy while ASIT begins to take effect. Although they do not discuss specific medications, the International Task Force on Canine Atopic Dermatitis notes there is no current evidence suggesting concurrent administration of topical or systemic anti-inflammatory drugs in dogs changes the clinical benefit of ASIT.

This is consistent with research across many fields that suggests multimodal treatment can help improve patient comfort and outcomes while potentially decreasing costs and adverse events. Peer-reviewed studies supporting multimodal therapies that combine immunotherapy and antipruritics specifically have yet to be published.

**REFERENCES**


**Conclusion**

Veterinarians do not have to choose between antipruritics and immunotherapy. Newer antipruritics empower us to make our clients and patients happy, giving us short-term solutions that can pave the way for healthier and less expensive long-term solutions. Ultimately, immunotherapy is still considered the gold-standard for long-term allergy relief.