What is contact allergy?

A contact dermatitis is a type of inflammation that occurs when a substance touches the skin and causes irritation or an allergic reaction. This results in a red, typically itchy ash. Fortunately, contact reactions are uncommon in dogs and cats.

How does this happen?

Initial sensitization (without noticeable symptoms or problems) often results from introduction of new material into the pets’ environment yet, over time (months to years) may start to cause inflammation and discomfort. Fabrics and chemicals are probably the most common culprits. Leafy plants used for ground cover have also been incriminated. That’s why surfaces that contact the ground (belly, underarms, bottoms of feet) tend to be the most likely to be affected.

Identification and Treatment?

Successful treatment of contact dermatitis requires identification of the offending substance but this is often easier said than done! Having your dog wear T-shirts to avoid any potential source of irritation can sometimes be helpful in diagnosing and treatment through avoidance. Patch testing, as is used in humans, has been used in dogs but the results have been equivocal. Isolation of suspect substances with subsequent challenge (by application to the skin) is the best method to detect an offending agent.

What do I do if I suspect a contact allergy?

If you suspect a contact dermatitis in your pet, thorough rinsing after exposure and use of anti-itch creams can help to soothe the skin and reduce inflammation. Seek the advice and recommendations of your veterinarian or veterinary dermatologist (www.acvd.org).

Substances reported to cause Contact Allergy in Dogs

- **Plants:** Pollens, jasmine blooms, poison ivy, poison oak, wandering Jew, dandelion leaves, cedar wood are examples
- **Medications:** Topical ointments and ear preparations are possible
- **Fibers:** wool, nylon, synthetics are examples