Autoimmune Series:
Canine Pemphigus Foliaceus

Pemphigus Foliaceus (PF) is non-contagious disease that affects the skin of dogs, cats, horses, and people.

PF is a disease seen in people, dogs, cats & horses.

Most cases respond well to a combination of therapies.

Veterinary dermatologists have expertise & training in management of this disease.

Find one at www.acvd.org

Pemphigus Foliaceus (PF) is a non-contagious disease that affects the skin of dogs, cats, horses, and people. PF is both a disease of the immune system and the skin. The problem begins when the animal's body recognizes parts of its own skin as foreign. As a result of this abnormal immune response, the skin is damaged. In a sense, the animal is trying to reject its skin, just as it would try to reject a viral or bacterial infection.

Why does the immune system recognize its own body as foreign?

Various explanations have been proposed and include genetic, environmental, drug, and viral factors. In dogs, there is some evidence for a genetic component, as PF is seen most commonly in certain breeds. In particular, Akitas, Doberman pinschers, schipperkes, dachshunds and chow chows may have a higher incidence. In man, genetic studies have shown PF is not a purely hereditary disease. It is more often thought of as a hereditary ability to develop PF, assuming that certain other necessary ingredients are present.

What age does PF typically develop?

Most often middle aged to older animals but it can occur in young adults and dogs and cats less than one year of age.

What do lesions look like? What are the symptoms of PF?

PF often mimics a bacterial or ringworm (fungal) infection. In most cases, pet owners notice red spots along with thick crusts (scabs) that form over the spots. The crusts occur most commonly on the nose, face, ears, and scrotum of male dogs, but can be found all over the body. Itchiness is variable.

Some pets will also feel bad- have a fever, act depressed and/or lethargic, and not want to eat. During this time numerous areas will develop crusts almost as if a wave of crusting spread over the body. Rarely, these animals will also develop swelling of the legs and/or abdomen. Lameness from sore or stiff joints may be seen during flare-ups.
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How is pemphigus foliaceus diagnosed?

Skin biopsy! A skin biopsy is important because many more common diseases can look like PF. Which lesions are taken for skin biopsy and which pathologist interprets the skin biopsies are very important. Veterinary dermatologists have specialized training to help ensure an accurate diagnosis of this sometimes difficult to diagnose disease. Ideally the biopsy should be interpreted by a pathologist with expertise in skin disease (“dermatopathologist”).

How is pemphigus foliaceus treated?

- The disease is aggravated by sunlight so restricting sun exposure during 10 am – 4 pm when UV rays are strongest is always recommended.
- Medications to suppress the immune system: glucocorticoids (prednisone, methylprednisolone), chemotherapy drugs (azathioprine, chlorambucil, cyclosporine). Each drug available has positive and negative effects. Rarely, serious side effects can occur but frequent monitoring reduces chances of treatment complications.
- Topical therapy can be additionally helpful in some cases.

What is the prognosis?

- Good… in most cases. PF can be controlled so that the skin is normal with only rare flare-ups, however treatment is usually needed for life. Rarely- there are some patients who do not respond to therapy with a variety of medications.
- Periodic monitoring will be required to watch for any side effects of the drug therapy that is being used.
- If you are not seeing dramatic improvement within 3-4 weeks of a correct initial diagnosis, referral to a veterinary dermatologist is recommended.