

PEMPHIGUS FOLIACEUS

Pemphigus foliaceus (PF) is a non-contagious autoimmune skin disease that affects dogs, cats, horses and people. The problem starts when the animal's body recognizes the skin as 'foreign' and the immune system attacks it. Short-lived blisters or pus-filled pimples develop and as these rupture, crusts and hair loss is noted. In most cases, it is unknown what causes this problem. In some cases drugs viruses, genetics or environmental causes are suspected, but this can be difficult to prove. Males and females are affected. The age of disease onset is variable and can occur from under one year old to over ten years old. In older dogs, neoplasia (cancer) may be suspected as an inciting problem.

Skin lesions usually start as red bumps that rapidly develop into pustules (pus-filled pimples). These rupture quickly and a crust is formed from the exudates and pus. Sometimes large body surfaces are affected. Lesions are commonly noticed on the muzzle, ears and around the eyes but can occur anywhere on the body including the footpads. Itchiness is variable, as some animals are not bothered at all while others are constantly rubbing and scratching their skin. Some animals are lethargic, depressed and lose their appetite during the active phases of this disease. This disease can also wax and wane over several months and long intervals may exist when the animals appears normal.

When the skin surface is abnormal, it is common for bacterial infections to occur among these crusts. These infections will often cause additional discomfort. The signs of skin infections can be very similar to the signs of PF (pustules/pimples), so it can be difficult to determine which problem is causing the clinical signs.

PF has to be definitively diagnosed before starting treatment. Several other diseases may mimic PF. These mimicking diseases must first be eliminated by performing various tests including skin scrapings, cultures (for bacteria or fungi), cytology and therapeutic trials, and then a skin biopsy must be done. Biopsies are taken by surgically removing a small piece of the affected skin, specially preparing it and sending it to a laboratory where the skin is looked at under a microscope by a dermatopathologist. Diagnosis may be difficult and occasionally several biopsies need to be taken at various times to diagnose PF.

Treatment of PF requires the use of immune-suppressing drugs. These drugs stop the immune system from attacking the skin, but can have serious side effects. When on these types of drugs, the pet must be monitored at least weekly. The type of monitoring depends on which specific drugs are used. Monitoring is more frequent at the beginning of therapy and less frequent over time. Treatment is usually life-long and periodic monitoring is required. Some animals cannot be controlled with currently available treatment. There are no tests that will determine which drug or drug combination will be best for an individual. Sometimes several differently drugs will be tried and may need to be changed if there is inadequate response.

Since these drugs suppress the immune system, the body is less able to fight off infections. Secondary infections need to be watched for while on these drugs (this may be life-long).