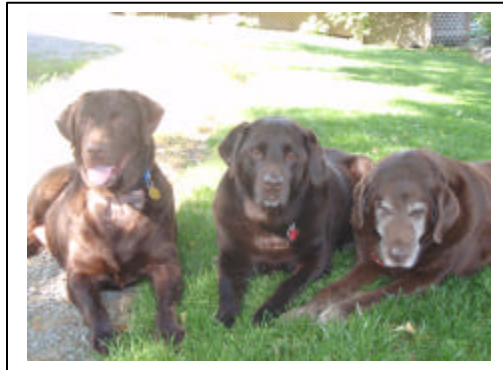




RELIEVING THE ITCH FOR ALLERGY DOGS

Written by Vikki

Proud Owner of Sadie, Snickers & Hershey



My husband, Kevin, and I have 2 rescued chocolate labs. Sadie is 13 years old and Snickers is 6 years old. In June 2009, we I decided to adopt a third lab; you know the saying “Labs are like potato chips; you can’t stop at one”! We contacted Lab Rescue and they found the perfect match for all of us. Hershey is a 4 ½ year old bouncing, full of energy, “I will eat anything not nailed down – and even then I will try it”, chocolate lab.



When we first met Hershey he was on his way to looking like a Mexican hairless dog. He was nearly bald on his chest and ears and was missing patches of fur around one eye, on his belly and legs from scratching. He did this neat trick of turning circles on his butt, much like a spinning top and he smelled like corn chips. He was an allergy dog. I loved him at first sight!

Neither Kevin nor I have ever suffered from allergies so a dog with allergies was a foreign concept for us. Lab Rescue provided us with great information, plenty of resources and lots of reassurance as to what we could expect. However, I felt I wanted to research the topic of allergies a little more myself and see if there were things I could do or provide for Hershey beyond the conventional treatment, namely Prednisone, which my veterinarian prescribed.

What are allergies?

Allergies are the body’s immune response to molecules around us known as allergens. Allergens can come from a variety of sources. Your dog can inhale them (pollen from trees, grass, flowers), ingest them (certain proteins, grains or food additives) or come in contact with them (carpets, wool, mold) causing the immune system to react and the body to release histamine. While humans respond to histamine with a runny nose, watering eyes or sneezing, one of the affects on dogs is itching of their skin.

What are the signs that a dog has allergies?

A dog suffering from allergies may demonstrate one or more of the following:



- ? Excessive scratching of their body
- ? Spinning on their bottom (once worms have been ruled out)
- ? Chewing on their feet
- ? Rubbing their face on furniture and carpeting
- ? Recurrent ear infections
- ? An odour to them (may smell like yeast or corn chips)
- ? Hair loss

Allergies usually start in dogs early; 1-3 years of age is seen most often but they can occur in all ages and get worse over time. The key is to identify the cause of the allergy. The most common reactions are to food or seasonal allergies. Talk to your vet about allergy testing or try eliminating things from your dog's environment and diet until you find the source of the allergen. Be sure to rule out fleas or flea allergy dermatitis; you may not see fleas on your pet because they are biting and scratching so much but your dog may be having an allergic reaction to the flea bite.

Conventional treatment for dogs with allergies

Conventional treatment for dogs with allergies is Prednisone (a corticosteroid). This prescription drug is very effective in controlling your dog's symptoms, particularly in providing relief from itching. However, it is often over-prescribed and overused by good-intentioned vets and pet owners alike. Any steroid, when used over time, will have side effects and Prednisone is no different. Common side effects for your dog, even when on a low dose can include increased drinking, increased urination, weight gain, depression and/or hyperactivity. Long term effects of using a steroid can cause long lasting and/or permanent damage to the immune system, adrenals and liver. Chronic infections and diabetes mellitus have also been documented.

Hershey has had his fair share of Prednisone when his symptoms began to affect his quality of life (and our sanity). You can always tell when Hershey is on "his meds" as his eyes are as wide as saucers, he drinks the better part of 18 gallons of water in 2 days and he is always desperate to relieve himself outside. Even in a very low dose, 2.5 mcg every other day, we see these symptoms.

Antihistamines are another prescribed drug that veterinarians like to use. Although they only work in up to 30% of dogs with allergies, their side effects are less severe than that of a steroid. These may include sedation, hyperactivity, loss of appetite or dry mouth. We have tried Hershey unsuccessfully on antihistamines. Keeping in mind that Hershey is a young Labrador, it was just our luck that the side effect he experienced was hyperactivity with no reduction in his symptoms. Hershey, on antihistamines, was like an uncontrollable ping pong ball that no amount of walking, running (on his part), crying or caffeine (on our part) could satiate.

It would be wonderful if all allergy dogs responded well to a natural approach to treatment but this just isn't the case. Depending on how bad your dog's allergies are, you may at some point resort to prescription drugs, even if it is just to get your pet's symptoms

Tip:

Ask your vet for a prescription of your dog's medication. Many dog medications have a human equivalent and the dispensing fees at your local pharmacy are cheaper than the vet office.

Compare \$4.99 dispensing fee at Costco to the \$15.00 at the Vet office.

under control or to give him relief. Talk to your vet about the different options available to you.

What can I do for my allergy dog at home?

Tip:

Many pet supply stores will offer a discount on pet food if you buy 2 or more bags at a time. Some stores will offer a frequent buyer program; buy 9 bags and get the 10th free.

Exercise – Exercise is essential. It helps stimulate various systems within in the dog's body while increasing blood flow. The more exercise your dog gets, the more distracted he is from scratching. If your pet is both physically and mentally exercised regularly, their body will be quicker to heal and less focused on their discomforts.

Diet – I thought we had been feeding our dogs a top quality food. When Hershey arrived on the scene we realized that his allergies may be exacerbated by common allergens in his food; mainly the protein, grains and food additives. As a result, we moved all 3 dogs to a grain-free, all natural dog food that had a novel protein such as venison or duck. The response from Hershey was swift and effective. His allergy symptoms were reduced by at least 50% just from the food change. The bigger surprise for Kevin and I was the almost immediate change in Sadie, our older dog. Sadie has always been a quiet dog but within a few days of being on the new diet, Sadie was up and about, more alert and ready to venture farther than the end of the driveway (we make it all the way to the mailbox now!). Her coat became shiny and we noticed her scratching less. We suspect that she too had a mild case of allergies that we were unaware of.

Over time some dogs seem to develop allergies to the protein (chicken, beef, turkey or lamb) in their dog food. Pet food stores such as Global Ryan's Pet Food or PetValu stock a variety of brands that use a novel protein, such as venison, rabbit, buffalo, emu, etc. that most dogs have never been or had limited exposure to. This greatly reduces their chance of having an allergy to them. These novel proteins are usual made without the inclusion of grains (another ingredient that many dogs have an allergy to) and all naturally.

Tip:

Wash your dogs paws and under belly after each walk to remove any allergens they may have picked up. Don't have a hose handy? Walk them through a shallow pan filled with water, kept by the front door.

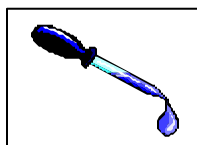
Bathing – Bathing your dog more frequently can help reduce their discomfort. If your dog is getting regular exercise outdoors, they are likely absorbing allergens through their skin so bathing is the best way to remove allergens present on the skin and sooth the itching. Ensure that you are using a shampoo that was designed for dogs as our own bathing products have a different pH and can be harsh and drying to a dog's skin. Look for shampoo and conditioners that use natural ingredients to sooth and moisturize your dog's skin such as oatmeal, aloe and hemp oil.

Oatmeal is common place in many shampoos so you can try it on its own. Place 2 cups of large flake oatmeal in a nylon sock and soak in a bucket of warm water until the water turns a milky colour. Use the nylon sock filled with oatmeal like a sponge to soak your dog in the solution.

Remove allergens in the home – As much as possible, keep dust and dog hair to a minimum. By vacuuming carpets and washing pet beds on a regular basis, you keep your dog's contact with possible allergens to a minimum. Hershey sleeps elevated off the floor as we have carpeting in our bedroom. We use an oversized ottoman for him to sleep on and change the blanket on it regularly. He loves it.

Not a “Molly Maid” when it comes to cleaning? Try placing a stand-up HEPA air filter in the room most frequented by your pet. This may help filter some of the allergens in the air.

Ear infections – the likely cause of your dog smelling like a bag of corn chips!



Many allergy dogs are prone to ear infections. The yeast smell that some allergy dogs have (Hershey sometimes smells of corn chips) is likely a result of an ear infection. Your vet can prescribe a number of ear medications that are anti-bacterial and anti-fungal. When we first adopted Hershey, he had a pretty bad ear infection that cleared quickly with the food change and the use of a vet prescribed ear ointment. His corn chip smell persisted and I looked for more natural ways to eliminate the smell and any bacteria that may be flourishing in his ears. I came across 3 remedies that may work for your pet but check with your vet first.

- 1) Mix half apple cider vinegar (works well on yeast infections) and half water. Mix together and using a dropper, drop 5 drops into each ear, massaging gently after. This can be done 2-3 times a day. If the dog has open sores within the ear, I do not recommend this remedy as the vinegar can sting.

While this remedy did not work for Hershey, I found it did wonders for Snickers and eliminated her head shaking quite quickly.

- 2) Take 2 teaspoons of extra virgin olive oil and mix with a drop of tea tree oil and a drop of lavender essential oil. Use the dropper to drop 5 drops into each ear and massage gently after. Use with caution and sparingly as dogs can be very sensitive to essential oils. Tea tree oil is natural antiseptic and fungicide and has antibacterial properties to it. Lavender is known for its healing properties.

This remedy did wonders for eliminating the corn chip smell in Hershey’s ears (and making them smell like flowers) and soothing them. It is the remedy we use most often for all the dogs.



- 3) Take one clove of organic garlic and crush it into 2 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil. Allow the remedy to rest for 1-2 hours or until the garlic has sunk to the bottom. Drop 5 drops of the solution into each ear and massage gently after. Garlic has a powerful anti-bacterial component to it.

Topical ointments – do they help relieve itching?

There have been some days when Hershey has had a flare-up and scratched or chewed some areas of his skin until they are red. This usually happens when I have failed to hose him down after a walk or when we have been doing projects in the house that have raised the dust level. Below are some of the topical ointments that I have tried.

After Bath Conditioner by Professional Pet Products – This spray conditioner is infused with natural oatmeal and it smells wonderful. It worked wonders on areas of dry skin that Hershey had on his back and eliminated areas of flaking. It is the product I use most often to ease areas of redness due to scratching. The spray form also makes it ideal to use on Sadie’s dry elbow patches.



Apple cider vinegar rinse – This rinse is used in a 1:1 ratio with water after your dog has been bathed to aid with skin irritation, re-growth of hair and has natural deodorant properties. I tried the same ratio in a spray bottle and, while it did not deter Hershey from licking his paws (he loves the taste of apple cider vinegar), it did keep the bugs and mosquitoes away while we were on walks.

Bag Balm - Better known as udder balm (used on cow’s udders) this product can be found at your local farm store. Bag Balm is a wonderful antiseptic and moisturizer for your dog’s dried out and sometimes cracked elbows but the product’s petroleum base is impossible to get out of carpets, even when professionally cleaned.

Benadryl – After the last anti-histamine fiasco with Hershey, we were thrilled to discover Benadryl in spray form at the local pharmacy. The spray made applying the solution easy, especially in hard to reach places like the belly and the armpits. Benadryl was effective in giving Hershey temporary relief from his scratching but we found the product to be expensive and we used a lot of it.

Bitter Yuck – This no chew spray is water-based with all natural ingredients and safe to spray on paws and itchy areas to help prevent your dog from chewing on themselves. I can attest to the fact that it taste horrible (do not get too close as you spray your pet). While this product has worked for other dogs that we know, it was doomed to fail for Hershey when he licked it off the floor and his paws faster than we could spray it!

Caution:

Certain natural oil concoctions may work for your dog but the oily residue may be difficult to clean off carpets, furniture and clothing. Keep in mind that your dog may also want to lick the oil off before it is absorbed.

Emu oil – This oil can be found at the health food store. Derived from the emu bird, this oil is advertised as having anti-inflammatory and an analgesic affect when applied topically. We did not have success with this product. While it did a nice job of moisturizing Hershey’s skin, the oil was messy and did little to reduce his irritation.

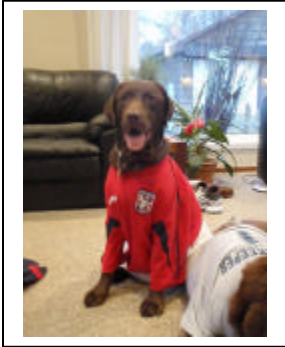
Neem oil – I found this oil at my local health food store. It is widely used herbal remedy for dogs due to its anti-inflammatory and pain relieving components, treatment of yeast infections and boosting immune systems. I have seen it in an oil, cream, pill form and as an additive to shampoos. I tried the diluted form of the oil on Hershey’s skin. While it was mildly affective in reducing his itching, it worked wonders at keeping insects away from him in the summer time. The draw back to it was that the oil was messy and took some time for it to absorb into his skin. Great if Hershey was going to be outdoors, not so good indoors. Perhaps I will try it in cream form or as an additive to his shampoo.

Polysporin Itch Relief – We found this cooling gel very inexpensive at Wal-Mart and in a fairly large bottle. The gel was easy to apply, absorbed into Hershey’s skin quickly and was effective in reducing his irritations temporarily.

Tar-ific Therapeutic Spray by Professional Pet Products – I found this product at my local PetValu. It was created for dogs with “localized skin conditions, skin inflammation and itching”. The product worked well on small areas of irritation but needs to be re-

applied often. It comes in a handy spray bottle and a small amount goes a long way. The spray was approximately \$10 for 237ml. The downside to it is the smell. It has a definite tar smell to it.

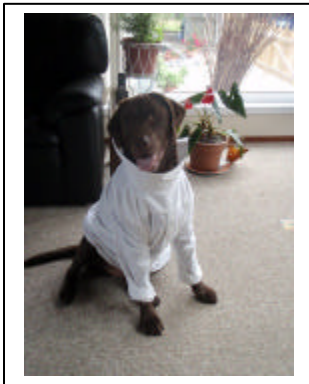
Creature comforts- Does clothing really help deter scratching?



Clothing - Putting a shirt on Hershey has been effective in stopping his scratching and allowing us to sleep at night. We are not and never have been “in” to dressing our dogs up in funny outfits, but the effectiveness of clothing him, his willingness to wear it and the relief we all get is worth the funny stares we get from neighbours.

It took us awhile and extensive searching through our closets to find what ultimately worked. We began with t-shirts. With both Kevin and I working for different sports teams, Hershey was “styling” in a variety of shirts from Umbro, Adidas and Speedo. While this afforded good coverage to his underbelly, the neck openings were often too low to protect his upper chest, a favorite spot to scratch.

We moved on to Hershey’s “preppy” look; t-shirts with a collar. Standing the collar up not only provided extra protection for his chest and neck but he looked cool! The only draw back was the sleeves were not long enough to protect the length of his fore legs.



We moved on to Hershey’s “Elvis” look; a proper button down dress shirt with the collar up and the sleeves rolled up just enough that he was not tripping on them. While this outfit covered all the essentials, we were not convinced that he wouldn’t blow the buttons or chew the collar (or that Snickers and Sadie weren’t secretly making fun of Hershey), so we moved into the one outfit that has worked like a charm for us and fondly referred to as Hershey’s “scholarly” look. This consisted of purchasing a thin, natural fibre, ladies size large turtle neck sweater from Wal-Mart. The turtle neck itself is snug enough around his neck that it sits just below Hershey’s ears and protects his neck and chest without suffocating him. The sleeves, when rolled up, fit snugly around his legs. A small knot in the back keeps the bulk of the sweater tied up under his belly, so as not to impede walking or playing.

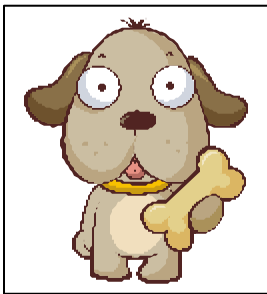
You may be asking “how do you wrestle him into it and does he not get too hot?” Surprisingly the answer is no to both. Having a material close to his skin seems to sooth Hershey and prevents him from itching. If he does scratch, the clothing creates a barrier to buffer the skin from his nails. Heat does not seem to be an issue but then our labs would take any opportunity to nestle into abandoned blankets, duvets, pillows or beds.

When it comes to licking and/or scratching his back end, Hershey does well in running shorts. These are the shorts with a lining in them. These work best at night when your dog is moving around less, however Hershey has successfully worn them all day without incident (or mocking by fellow dogs).

Trying to prevent chewing of the feet has been a challenge. Dogs are not thrilled about having socks on their feet. I have tried children’s socks with the traction nibs on the

bottom but Hershey always seems to get them off. Even with elastic medical tape to hold up the socks Hershey has a knack for removing them. The next step will be to hunt down proper dog booties.

What about supplements for my dog?



We began to research alternatives to the conventional medicine being provided for dogs with allergies. Our ultimate and long term goal is to help Hershey heal from the inside out; help make his immune system stronger so that the allergies would be less severe and he would be less prone to developing more as he aged. Our short term goals are to ease his discomfort as naturally as we can.

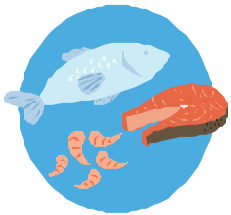
As well rounded as some dog foods are, many nutrients are lost during the processing of the foods. Even the most health conscious foods will need to be baked at a high temperature, thus destroying important vitamins and minerals.

Much like humans, as a dog ages they often lose the ability to absorb the essential nutrients from their food and can become deficient. The same can be true for dogs with chronic conditions, immune dysfunction or long term medication use. Dogs that are exposed to excessive pollution, under stress or working dogs may require greater supplementation than what is provided in their food.

Before giving any vitamin or mineral, talk to your veterinarian or holistic vet to ensure you are giving the correct supplement for your dog's needs and in the right dose.

Tip:

Look for a product that lists the specific fish source. Salmon, tuna, anchovies, sardines and krill are rich in EPA and DHA.



Essential fatty acids – This has been the number one supplement recommended in all the research we have done. Essential fatty acids (EFAs) help maintain your pets healthy coat and skin therefore it is vital for dogs with allergies. EFAs are also known for their anti-inflammatory properties and may ease some of the discomfort your dog experiences because of allergies. We did not realize how affective this supplement was until we stopped giving Hershey any form of EFA. Within a couple of days his skin had dried out and was starting to flake. Once he was back on the EFA, his flaking and dry skin ceased.

With such a variety of products out there to choose from, it is hard to know what is right for your pet. I look for an EFA supplement that has a combination of fish, flax and borage oils. This will give you the important Omega 3 fatty acids that your pet requires, including ALA (alpha-linolenic acid) from flax seed and EPA/ DHA (eicosapentaenoic and docosahexaenoic acids) from fish oil. The borage oil will provide the Omega 6 fatty acids, particularly GLA (gamma-linolenic acid) known for its anti-inflammatory properties.

Tip:

Chia seeds can be expensive to buy at your health food store. Check out your local Bulk Barn Store for a better price.

Chia seeds – These small black and white seeds can be traced back as far as the ancient Aztecs who used the seeds as an energy endurance food for their warriors. The seeds are easily digested, loaded with antioxidants, are gluten free and have a mild taste to them. Chia seeds have a higher Omega 3 content than flax seed and do not require grinding. The seeds contain protein, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, iron, manganese and zinc. We add a tablespoon to each of our dog's meals and they love them. Periodically we

check the dog's stool to ensure that they are digesting the seeds (seeds in the stool indicates your dog is not breaking down the seeds).

Tip:

Brewer's yeast has been used as a natural remedy for fleas. The yeast lowers the pH of the dog's urine and contains sulfur, both deterrents for fleas.

Brewer's yeast – A high quality brewer's yeast (not a supplement that uses the by-products from the brewing process) contains B vitamins, specifically biotin, and minerals such as zinc that are essential to the health of your dog's coat and skin as well as thiamine, which is beneficial for dogs under stress. Many holistic vets use brewer's yeast as an immunity builder, something all allergy dogs could use. It comes in a powder form that we sprinkle on the dog's food and the dogs seem to enjoy the taste.

The drawback to brewer's yeast is that it **can be an allergen** for some dogs, especially if you are using low quality yeast. We discovered this recently when I purchased a de-bittered yeast from the grocery store. The low quality yeast caused a reaction in all 3 dogs that ranged from an ear infection to increased scratching. Once off the poor quality yeast, all symptoms disappeared. Now I buy yeast only from the health food store and am cautious as to how much I give. I will continue to monitor Hershey more closely in case this is a sign of a yeast allergy.

Introduce brewer's yeast cautiously to your dog's diet, purchase quality yeast from your local health food store and discontinue immediately if your dog experiences a flare-up such as increased scratching or a return of an ear infection/build-up in the ears.

Probiotic yogurt – Many dogs with allergies can also suffer from poor digestion. The addition of a small amount of natural yogurt or kefir to your dog's diet can encourage healthy digestion through "friendly" bacteria. This may enhance your dog's immunity while keeping yeast in check.

The drawback to yogurt is that **many dogs are lactose intolerant**. Introduce yogurt to your dog's diet cautiously and in small amounts to ensure tolerance. Only use a yogurt that is all natural, no sugar or fruits added and with live bacterial cultures in it.

Vitamin C – Unlike humans, dogs manufacture their own vitamin C, however, as dogs age, are subject to external stress (exercise or working dogs) and internal stress (coping with ailments, including allergies) they manufacture less than optimal amounts and can be deficient. Vitamin C, specifically ascorbate C (seen most commonly as Ester C) is used for its anti-inflammatory and immunoresponsive properties, both necessary for dogs suffering from allergies. It is also a powerful antioxidant and a 1992 study at Arizona State University supports the claim of vitamin C's antihistamine effects.

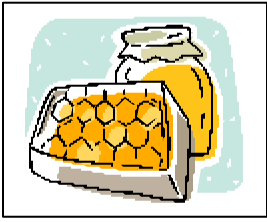
Zinc – Zinc aids in the promotion of healthy skin and coats in dogs and may encourage the re-growth of fur in areas where a dog has scratched bald due to allergies. It is an important factor in relieving the itch and healing your pet's skin.

Apple cider vinegar – Apple cider vinegar re-balances your dog's pH levels (normal is 6.2 – 6.5). If the levels are too high (alkaline) or too low (acidic), your dog becomes susceptible to illness or disease. Apple cider vinegar may help relieve itchy skin (excess grains in your pets food may lead to more alkaline) and boost your dogs immune system with its anti-bacterial and anti-fungal properties. Apple cider vinegar is inexpensive and can be easily added to your dog's meal (diluted) or their water bowl. Do not give on an empty stomach.

Tip:

You can purchase apple cider vinegar at your local health food store. Ensure you get raw, unpasteurized, unfiltered, organic apple cider vinegar with "mother" to get the best results.

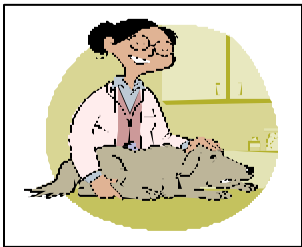
If your dog has an allergy to yeast, apple cider vinegar may not be a product you want to try. Yeast is used in the fermentation process of making apple cider vinegar and your dog may have a reaction to.



Honey – Honey has been used for centuries for medicinal purposes as it is loaded with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and is easily digested. It may be beneficial for your dog, when bought locally, as it contains very small amounts of pollen (not enough to get a reaction). Repeated use of honey in your dogs diet may help build up a tolerance and desensitize your dog to the pollen. Purchase locally (as the honey will contain pollen local to your area and the same type your dog is exposed to), raw and unpasteurized. Your dog will love the taste of it.

MSM – MSM (Methylsulfonylmethane) is most often seen in conjunction with glucosamine, but can be purchased as a supplement on its own. Much has been written about its antioxidant qualities and its use in moderating allergic reactions by flushing toxins and allergens from your dog's system. It helps to decrease inflammation and aids in the absorption of other vitamins and minerals critical to your dog's health.

Quercetin – This flavanoid is found in apples, tea, nuts, berries, cauliflower and cabbage or better yet at your health food store in capsule form. Quercetin acts as an inhibitor to certain enzymes therefore making it a strong anti-inflammatory. It also inhibits the release of histamine making it a promising supplement for dogs with allergies. Research indicates that it is a safe product and non-toxic. Find a quercetin supplement that includes bromelain (this aids the absorption of quercetin and has a strong anti-inflammatory component to it as well), vitamin C and other flavanoids such as rutin.



There are many supplements on the market (with promising research) helping your dog over-come their allergies, or at the least, make them more comfortable. Talk to your vet about what has been proven to work and what would be best for your dog. Contact a holistic veterinarian in your area if your dog is not improving or you are not seeing results from any of the above suggestions. Often holistic vets have a treatment regime that is the “key” to unlocking your pets underlying condition.

Many thanks to Vikki for spending the time and energy researching such a vital topic and sharing it with Lab Rescue.