PEMPHIGUS FOLIACEUS

What is pemphigus foliaceus?

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. It causes crusting on the skin surface. The skin under these crusts is raw and may be painful. The disease may begin on the face and ears, but often spreads to affect the skin on other parts of the body. It can also cause thickening and cracking of the footpads. Fortunately, other organs are not affected by the disease.

PF may occur in both males and females. The age of onset ranges from very young to very old, however most cases start in middle aged animals. The skin lesions first start as small red spots that rapidly form a pustule (pimple), then crust. In most cases, the major lesions noted by the owner are the red spots and the thick crusts (scabs) that form over the spots. Most commonly, the crusts are found on the nose, face, ears, footpads, but can present on any location on the body. Itchiness is variable, and some animals may develop secondary bacterial infections as a result of the damage to the skin caused by the disease or the rubbing. Occasionally, depression, lethargy, poor appetite, lameness, and swelling of the legs and/or abdomen occurs with this condition.

What causes pemphigus foliaceus?

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. Obviously, the next question is, 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 of PF than other breeds.
How is pemphigus foliaceus diagnosed?

Pemphigus foliaceus is diagnosed by submitting skin biopsies to a pathologist for microscopic evaluation. This requires the dermatologist to surgically remove multiple small pieces of tissue (biopsy) from affected areas on the pet’s body. These may be collected under local anesthesia, but often, sedation or general anesthesia is required.

Definitive diagnosis of PF should **ALWAYS** be made prior to treatment as many other diseases can look like PF, as the treatments for these diseases are very different and the treatment for PF can have many side effects for the pet and make other diseases worse.

How is pemphigus foliaceus treated?

Once a diagnosis of PF has been made, then several treatments are available. All treatments use different types of drugs that suppress the abnormal immune response and are therefore called immunosuppressive drugs. These drugs have potential side effects which need to be understood prior to starting treatment. On rare occasions, serious side effects can occur, but frequent monitoring reduces chances of treatment complications. Other considerations are route of administration, frequency of treatments and cost of treatment. 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. Periodic monitoring will be required to watch for any side effects of the drug therapy that is being used. In addition, it is important to realize that some cases of PF do not respond well to any available treatment and can be frustrating for the owner to treat.

At the present time there is no test which will determine what form of treatment your pet will best respond to. Your veterinary dermatologist may have to try several different drugs or combinations of drugs before you will know whether your pet’s disease can be controlled.

RECOMMENDED THERAPY:  
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________