

SA-3 MEMO RELATED TO STEROIDS

We get a lot of dogs in with skin issues. The basis of those issues is usually allergies and usually not food allergies or solely food allergies. Because we are a rescue we can't keep these dogs in foster care for months at a time. If they were "owned" dogs, the owner could take all the time in the world to work through various scenarios to determine the specific allergies and find a solution or they could be tested and have allergy shots made up. But this isn't practical in the rescue world. When we get a dog in who is itchy, we DO NOT want to start the dog on steroids. We DO often give an initial "small" steroid shot which makes the dog more comfortable until we can control the issue and it serves as something of a "test" for allergies.

- If the dog stops itching within a few hours, it is most likely a contact or air borne allergy
- It eliminates mites as a possibility
- If it works, it means it is not food allergies. Of course there can be food allergies mixed in with other allergies so changing to a good food can certainly help. But statistically (per my vet) food allergies occur about 20% of the time and elimination diets are difficult and seldom successful due to human error. Assuming other allergies first makes sense.

We might also give an initial small steroid shot as we start the dog on Atopica to relieve the itching and allow the skin to heal while the Atopica is beginning to work. (By small, I mean one that will be wearing off in a couple of weeks.) We do not want to give steroid shots as simply a way of controlling the itch.

So, once we have given a steroid shot, we cannot place a dog until that shot has worn off and we have determined the extent of the allergy and what treatment we need to give. In milder allergy issues, the treatment may be simply more frequent baths in a medicated shampoo and possibly Benedryl or another antihistamine. If it is a bad allergy where the skin is black and smelly, baths should be combined with Atopica. If it is treated in another way such as with homeopathy, and it works, that is fine, assuming it can be done in a reasonable time frame.....but only if there is no further need for steroids. If the dog becomes itchy again to the point where a steroid shot is needed, the treatment isn't effective enough for a foster dog. We need to go on to other things.

Keep in mind that we are adopting these dogs out to folks, most of whom are not experienced dog people. They are probably not going to be as dedicated to maintaining a perfect diet and frequent baths. Giving a dog to people and telling them that they may need an occasional steroid shot is an invitation to them to start giving routine steroid shots. Unfortunately there are a lot of vets out there who are very willing to do this. Steroid shots have a lot of side effects, some of which can eventually be fatal and some of which make the dog a less pleasant companion. An example would be Cushings which is often brought on in their older years due to the use of steroids; and a dog on steroids is often going to drink a lot more water and have accidents. Atopica does not currently show serious side effects. (It can cause nausea but that can be controlled; it does cause hair growth. It does suppress the immune system, but then so do steroids. After a month, most dogs can begin taking less of the Atopica until they are down to only two a week.) I hope this helps clarify the issue and why I get antsy when I see steroid shots being used beyond the initial appointment unless there are other changes being made to the treatment. And it also explains why we often go to Atopica quickly in these cases.

Communication:

A related issue is that we are separated by many miles and we can't see the dogs and follow their progress unless the foster home both reads and posts to the email list regularly. I need to make judgments regarding adoptions and can't really make good judgments on a dog I don't know unless I'm getting lots of regular feedback and photos. Without this, we may be swapping dogs around a bit so that more than one foster home has seen the dog and knows the situation. We do this now on some behavior issues but in some cases we will do this with skin/medical issues also. I don't want anyone to be offended by this. Just know that we have to do everything we can to give the potential adopter a realistic picture of the dog and their issues. Otherwise we will have unhappy adopters, bad PR and probably dogs coming back to us.

Hope this helps explain things.