

- An estimated 10 percent of the population may be allergic to animals.
- A higher rate of 20 to 30 percent of individuals with asthma have pet allergies.
- In the US, despite orders from their physicians, 80% of people with pet allergies refused to give up their pets.

It's Not You, It's Me

Any and all cats and dogs may cause reactions for people who are allergic to animals. Pets can cause problems to allergic patients in several ways. Their dander, or skin flakes, as well as their saliva and urine, can cause an allergic reaction. The animal hair is not considered to be a very significant allergen. However, the hair or fur can collect pollen, dust, mold and other allergens.

Cats tend to cause more reactions than dogs for allergic people, although some people are more sensitive to dogs than cats. **Contrary to popular belief, there are no "non-allergenic" breeds of dogs or cats; even hairless breeds may cause symptoms.**

Dogs with soft, constantly-growing hair—like Poodles or the Bichon Frise—may be less irritating to some individuals, although this may be because they are bathed and groomed more frequently. One dog or cat may be more irritating to an individual allergy sufferer than another animal of the same species.

A frequent misconception is that shorthaired animals cause fewer problems. It is the dander (skin scales) that causes the most significant allergic reactions - not the length or amount of hair on the pet. As stated previously, allergens are also found in the pet's saliva and urine. In addition, dogs have been reported to cause acute symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis, or inflammation of the eye, and hay fever after running through fields and then coming back into contact with their owners.

What To Do

If someone in your household has been diagnosed with a pet allergy by an allergist, carefully

consider whether you can live with the symptoms before you bring a new pet home. Except in the case of children, who sometimes outgrow allergies, few people with allergies become accustomed to pets to which they are allergic. Too many allergic owners obtain pets without thinking through the challenges of living with allergies.

If your or a family member's allergies are simply miserable, but not life-threatening, take these five steps to reduce the symptoms:

1. Create an "allergy free" zone in your home—preferably the allergic person's bedroom—and strictly prohibit the pet's access to it. Consider using impermeable covers for the mattress and pillows. Allergic individuals should not pet, hug or kiss their pets because of the allergens on the animal's fur or saliva. Litter boxes should be placed in an area unconnected to the air supply for the rest of the home, and should be avoided by the allergic patient.

Indoor pets should be restricted to as few rooms in the home as possible. Isolating the pet to one room, however, will not limit the allergens to that room. Air currents from forced-air heating and air-conditioning will spread the allergens throughout the house. Homes with forced-air heating and/or air-conditioning may be fitted with a central air cleaner. This may remove significant amounts of pet allergens from the home. The air cleaner should be used at least four hours per day.

2. Clean frequently and thoroughly to remove dust and dander, washing articles such as couch covers and pillows, curtains, and pet beds.

- Avoid dust-and-dander-catching furnishings such as cloth curtains and blinds and carpeted floors.

- Because animal allergens are sticky, you must remove the animal's favorite furniture, remove wall-to-wall carpet and scrub the walls and woodwork. Keep surfaces throughout the home clean and uncluttered. Bare floors and walls are best.

- If you must have carpet, select ones with a low pile and steam clean them frequently. Better yet, use throw rugs that can be washed in hot water.

- Wear a dust mask to vacuum. Vacuum cleaners stir up allergens that have settled on carpet and make allergies worse. Use a vacuum with a HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filter if possible.

- Forced-air heating and air-conditioning can spread allergens through the house. Cover bedroom vents with dense filtering material like cheesecloth.

- Adding an air cleaner with a HEPA filter to central heating and air conditioning can help remove pet allergens from the air. The air cleaner should be used at least four hours per day. Another type of air cleaner that has an electrostatic filter will remove particles the size of animal allergens from the air. No air cleaner or filter will remove allergens stuck to surfaces, though.

3. Bathing your pet on a weekly basis can reduce the level of allergy-causing dander (shed old skin cells) by as much as 84 percent. Have someone without a pet allergy brush the pet outside to remove dander as well as clean the litter box or cage.

Cats can get used to being bathed, but it's critical to only use products labeled for them; kittens may need a shampoo safe for kittens. Check with your veterinarian or a good book on pet care for directions about safe bathing. It is a good idea to use a shampoo recommended by your veterinarian or other animal care professional.

4. Don't be quick to blame the family pet for allergies. Ask your allergist to specifically test for allergies to pet dander. Many allergy sufferers are sensitive to more than one allergen. Reduce the overall allergen level in your environment by concentrating on all of the causes, not just the pet allergy.

Skin tests or special allergy blood tests are helpful for diagnosing allergy to animals, but are not always accurate. To gain confirmation about a pet's significance as an allergen, the pet should be removed from the home for several weeks and a thorough cleaning done to remove the hair and dander. It should be understood that it may take weeks of meticulous cleaning to remove all the animal hair and dander before a change in the allergic patient is noted.

5. Try treatments. Your allergist-immunologist can provide information on medications for your animal allergy, such as antihistamines, nasal sprays, decongestants or appropriate asthma medications. It is important to find an allergist who understands your commitment to living with your pet.

Allergy shots (immunotherapy) may be indicated for cat or dog allergies, particularly when the animal cannot be avoided. They are typically given for at least three years and decrease symptoms of asthma and allergy. Usually after about six months of weekly injections allergy symptoms improve and less medication is required. Allergy shots are most effective and safe when administered under the supervision of an allergist-immunologist. The response is highly individual and depends on environmental avoidance as well as the initial sensitivity of the individual.

A combination of approaches—medical control of symptoms, good housecleaning methods, and immunotherapy (allergy shots)—is most likely to succeed in allowing an allergic person to live with pets.

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

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