

Coping with Allergies

There is an old joke among allergists. Tell a patient to get rid of the cat and the patient will get rid of the doctor instead. There is an even older joke among shelter workers. If everyone who abandons their pet at the shelter were telling the truth, 90% of the population would be allergic to cats.

Where is the truth? The truth is that only a relatively small segment of the population, somewhere in the neighborhood of 15%, is truly allergic to cats. More importantly, however, for many people, there's not much merit to giving away the cat anyway.

An estimated one-third of Americans who are allergic to cats (about two million people) live with at least one cat in their household anyway. In a study of 341 adults who were allergic to cats or dogs and had been advised by their physicians to give up their pets, only one out of five did. What's more, 122 of them got another pet after a previous one had died. It's clear the benefits of pet companionship outweigh the drawbacks of pet allergies for many owners. Living comfortably with a companion animal despite being allergic to him requires a good understanding of the allergic condition and an adherence to a few rules.

In fact, in many cases, putting the cat out may be worse. Some new studies have shown that if a child tests positive to pollen and dust mite, but not for cat dander, giving away the cat may lead to the child becoming allergic to cats. In fact, one study showed that kids with a pet in the house get less asthma—and that two pets are more protective than one!

As one commentator noted, it is all part of the “dirt is good for you” theory. Exposing children early in life to dust, dander and other allergens will help the body build up immunity to them, much the same way as vaccinations.

Basics

All cats and dogs are allergenic (allergy-causing) to people who are allergic to animals. Cats tend to be more allergenic 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 be highly allergenic.

Dogs with soft, constantly growing hair—poodles or bichon frises, for example—may be less irritating to some individuals, although this may be because they are bathed and groomed more frequently. One dog or cat of a particular breed may be more irritating to an individual allergy sufferer than another animal of that same breed.

What is the source of irritation to pet-allergic humans? Glands in the animal's skin secrete tiny allergy-triggering proteins, called allergens, that linger in the animal's fur but also float easily in the air. Allergens are present in the animal's saliva and urine, too, and may become airborne when saliva dries on the fur. The

severity of reaction to these allergens varies from one person to the next, ranging from mild sniffing and sneezing to life-threatening asthma, and can be complicated by simultaneous allergies to other irritants in the environment.



Solutions

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

- The first rule of thumb, however, is not to self-diagnose. There are many reasons why an allergy is present and the cat may not be the culprit. An allergist (preferably one who loves cats!) can rule out other causes, and can also prescribe allergy medications that may make a world of difference.
- But if you are truly allergic to cats and living without Fluffy is worse than living with some sneezing, there is a lot you can do to manage the symptoms. First, get rid of carpeting. Not only are hard wood floors infinitely more stylish, but carpeting harbors allergens—as much as 100 times the amount as bare floors. And finally, wash kitty's bedding (and your own) regularly. No matter how allergic you are to cats, these simple measures can reduce symptoms dramatically.
- Create an “allergy-free” zone in the home—preferably the bedroom—and strictly prohibit the pet's access to it. Use a high-efficiency HEPA air cleaner (available at almost any home and garden store or discount department store) in the bedroom. Consider using impermeable covers for the mattress and pillows because allergen particles brought into the room on clothes and other objects can accumulate in them.
- Use HEPA air cleaners throughout the rest of the home, and avoid dust-and-dander-catching furnishings such as cloth curtains and blinds and carpeted floors. Clean frequently and thoroughly to remove dust and dander, washing articles such as couch covers and pillows, curtains, and pet beds. Use a “micro-filter” bag in the vacuum cleaner to effectively catch all the allergens.
- Bathing your pet on a weekly basis can reduce the level of allergens on fur by as much as 84 percent. Although products are available that claim to reduce pet allergens when sprayed on the animal's fur, studies show they are less effective than a weekly bath. Even cats can become accustomed to being bathed; check with your veterinarian's staff or a good book on pet care for directions about how to do this properly, and use whatever shampoo your veterinarian recommends.
- Don't be quick to blame the family pet for allergies. Ask your allergist to specifically test for allergies to pet dander, rather than making an assumption. And understand that allergies are cumulative. Many allergy sufferers are sensitive to more than one allergen. So if you're allergic to dust, insecticides, pollen, cigarette smoke, and cat dander, you'll need to reduce the overall allergen level in your environment by concentrating on all of the causes, not just the pet allergy. For example, you may need to step up measures to remove cat dander from your home and carefully avoid cigarette smoke during spring, when it's difficult to avoid exposure to pollen.
- Immunotherapy (allergy shots) can improve symptoms but cannot eliminate them entirely. It works by gradually desensitizing a person's immune system to the pet allergens. Allergy-causing



proteins are injected under the person's skin, triggering the body to produce antibodies (protective proteins) which block the pet allergen from causing a reaction. Patients are usually given one dose per week for a few weeks to months (depending on the severity of the allergy) and then can often manage with one injection per month.

- Additional treatments for allergies to pets are symptomatic, including steroidal and antihistamine nose sprays and antihistamine pills. For asthma, multiple medications, sprays, and inhalers are available. It is important to find an allergist who understands your commitment to living with your pet. A combination of approaches—medical control of symptoms, good housecleaning methods, and immunotherapy—is most likely to succeed in allowing an allergic person to live with pets.
- Is there more you can do? Absolutely, although in many cases it may not be necessary. You can let the sunshine and fresh air in by opening windows, you may put window fans in your house on exhaust, you can brush your kitty outside so that the dander flies away, plant-based non-toxic products are available that can take the sting out of allergens, you can take medication, you can get allergy shots, you can replace upholstery with vinyl which will keep allergens from accumulating, you can (like a well known shelter director with cat allergies) grin and bear it and eventually you may develop an immunity.

But first and foremost, don't rush out and get rid of the family pet. Cats are great for many reasons. They are cute. They are cuddly. They are the perfect antidote to loneliness, boredom, and depression. And now, thanks to new studies, they might even help "vaccinate" your children against asthma—another good reason to keep the cat.

Of course, if you do not currently have a pet and are considering one and know you are pet-allergic, be sure to consider carefully whether you can live with the allergy before you bring a new pet home. Except in the case of children, who sometimes outgrow allergies, few allergy sufferers become accustomed to pets to whom they are allergic. Too many allergic owners obtain pets without thinking through the difficulties of living with them. And too often, they end up relinquishing pets, a decision that is difficult for the owner and can be life-threatening for the pet.

If you need further assistance go to www.petsforlife.org,
www.mobilespca.org or email the Mobile SPCA
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