

Allergic? You Can Keep Your Cat!

Being allergic doesn't necessarily mean you can't have a pet or that you must give up the one you already have. You can solve this problem by learning more about minimizing pet-related allergies and making some minor adjustments to your environment. Controlling allergies takes some work, but if you really want to... you can!

Allergic reactions are caused by allergens—substances usually invisible to the human eye, such as pollen, dust, mold spores and food additives. People who have an allergy are rarely allergic to just one thing. The allergens your pet carries are associated with its skin, hair follicles and saliva. Dander (a naturally-occurring combination of skin cells and saliva that the pet is continually shedding) is most often the cause of pet allergies.

It is the protein of this dander that causes the reactions. Dander embeds itself in the carpeting, furniture and draperies and remains in the environment to cause reactions. “Fel d 1”, the cat allergen, is the major cause of allergic reactions to cats. During a cat's self-cleaning process, Fel d 1 protein in the saliva is deposited on the fur. It is also produced by sebaceous glands—the skin glands that secrete the oils that keep the skin and hair sleek and shiny. Un-neutered male cats usually produce more allergen than females. Proteins in the urine of cats will also trigger allergic reactions.

Some animals seem more tolerable than others because they shed fewer allergens. Unfortunately, there are no non-allergic animals. It is also true that the length of hair does not alter the animal's allergenicity. Within any given breed, or even litter, you may find animals that you can tolerate better than others.

Allergies are usually cumulative. Since the allergic person is sensitive to more than one thing, it is the Total Allergen Level that causes a reaction. Whether or not a person has symptoms depends on how many allergens are in the environment at the same time.

An individual who is allergic to animals may exhibit no noticeable symptoms when the total exposure is below his allergy threshold level. The trouble begins when there are enough allergens in the environment to exceed this level. The goal is to minimize exposure to airborne allergens that exceed tolerance thresholds and trigger attacks.

Clean the Air

If your pet makes you sneeze, you're probably also allergic to dust, grasses, pollen, smoke, feathers, air pollutants, perfume or even some foods. The following suggestions will help you reduce the allergens in your environment.

- **Wash your hands after handling any animal.** Do not touch your face, especially your eyes and nose, until your hands are clean.
- **Brush your cat daily** to remove loose hair before it has a chance to circulate throughout the house. Finish the grooming session by wiping the cat with a damp towel. (If possible, a non-allergic person should do the grooming.)
- **Rinse the cat at least once a week with distilled water** or you may want to try any of the cleansing wipes. There are also pet sprays on the market that are designed to reduce dander and shedding.
- **Invest in at least one good air purifier with a HEPA (“High Efficiency Particulate Air”) filter.** HEPA purifiers can be installed in home heating and air-conditioning systems or run from a standard electrical outlet. (The National Bureau of Standards states that air filtered by a HEPA unit is free of 99.97% of all contaminating particles.) At the very least put a HEPA purifier in the bedroom and keep the pets OUT! Experts claim that if you can breathe “pure” air for 8 to 10 hours each night, you can probably tolerate more exposure to allergenic substances during the day.
- **Be sure that air entering from windows or heating systems is filtered**—air-conditioning in warmer weather and muslin or cheesecloth on the heat vents during colder periods. Keep unfiltered windows closed.
- **Keep everything as clean and dust free as possible.** Dust all surfaces regularly with a damp cloth. Vacuum the floors instead of sweeping and remember to change the vacuum bags frequently. The electrostatic filter bags make the vacuum cleaner more efficient at picking up allergens.
- **Keep in mind that the more washable surfaces in your home, the better.** Choose furniture with smooth wooden surfaces and simple lines, walls that can be washed easily, blinds that wipe clean, and floors of polished hardwood, vinyl flooring, or tile.
- **All textiles in the home should be 100% washable and free of chemical finishes.** Encase mattresses, box springs, and pillows in allergy-proof covers. Buy special non-allergenic pillows, or those filled with Dacron or polyester.
- **Allergic persons are often supersensitive to odors.** Avoid perfumes, colognes and after-shave lotions, make-up containing fragrances, bubble bath, deodorizing aerosols, hair sprays, and cleaning fluids. Some scented laundry detergents and fabric softeners are especially irritating.
- **Be alert to mold growth**—usually in damp and humid areas such as basements, bathrooms, and closets. Air conditioners and humidifiers can be beneficial, but must be cleaned regularly as they can collect mold.
- If you seek help from an allergist, look for one who will be sensitive to your feelings and will try to do everything possible to help you keep your cat.

Source:

[Special thanks for information provided by Dr. Nan Boss at the Grafton (WI) Small Animal Hospital.]

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