

Allergies to Cats

About Cat Allergies

Studies show that approximately 15% of the population is allergic to dogs or cats. 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. It's clear the benefits of pet companionship outweigh the drawbacks of pet allergies for many owners. In addition, research shows that giving up a pet can actually bring on allergies. A 1999 study presented at the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology indicated that kids with early exposure to pets were less likely to develop allergies later in life. Parenting magazine stated children under 1 year old that have one cat have a 44% less chance of having allergies. In homes with two cats the child has a 70% less chance of having allergies. More recent research takes that one step further and indicates that removing a cat from a home can actually cause the child to become allergic to cats. Anecdotal evidence from many cat owners suggests that having cats in the home actually reduces allergy symptoms when around other cats.

Living comfortably with a cat (or other animal) despite being allergic to him requires a good understanding of the allergic condition and an adherence to a few rules.

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 (perhaps because dogs are bathed and groomed more frequently). Contrary to popular belief, there are no "non-allergenic" breeds of dogs or cats; even hairless breeds may be highly allergenic.

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.

Tips for Reducing Allergic Reactions

- Don't be quick to blame your cat for allergies. Ask your allergist to specifically test for allergies to pet dander, rather than making an assumption.
- Bathing your cat weekly with allergy shampoo reduces the allergens by as much as 84%, however, most cat owners find this extremely difficult. Equally as effective and much easier to use are allergy reducing bath wipes. Weekly use of these specially treated pre-moistened towels allows many allergy sufferers to live virtually symptom free with their beloved cat.
- 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, reducing the other allergens will reduce your allergic reaction. Use HEPA air cleaners throughout the rest of the home, and if possible, avoid dust-and-dander-catching furnishings such as cloth curtains and blinds and carpeted floors. Clean frequently and thoroughly using a "micro-filter" bag in the vacuum cleaner to effectively catch all the allergens.
- 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 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.
- Immunotherapy (allergy shots) can desensitize a person's immune system to pet allergens and improve symptoms.
- Additional treatments for allergies to pets are symptomatic, including steroidal and antihistamine nose sprays and antihistamine pills. 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.



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