PETS

ASTHMA AND ALLERGIES

Many people are able to live happily with their pets despite having allergies to pet allergens.

ALLERGIES

Many Australians have allergies, and they are very common in people with asthma.

Allergies occur when a person's immune system reacts to substances (allergens) that are harmless for most people.

Hay fever is one sort of allergic reaction, causing runny or itchy nose, throat or eyes.

Allergies can also trigger a flare-up of eczema, hives or asthma.

Avoiding the allergen is the best way to manage an allergy. While avoiding pet allergens can be difficult if the source is a much-loved family pet, taking steps to reduce your exposure may help.

In the long run, though, the most effective way to avoid allergens from cats and dogs is to not have these pets in the home.

ARE YOU ALLERGIC?

Some people are allergic to pet allergens. The severity of the allergic reaction varies between people and depends on the circumstances, and may not happen straight away.

If you are not sure if you're allergic to animals, your GP or an allergist can test you. A good way to self-test is to note if you get itchy, swollen or watering eyes after patting an animal.

You can also babysit a friend's animal for a week or so and see what effect that has on your asthma or allergies. However, it is possible to have a reaction to one pet and not another!

If you think you may be reacting to a pet (yours or someone else's), speak to your doctor who can confirm your suspicion using skin prick tests or allergen specific IgE (RAST) allergy tests.

COMMON CULPRITS

Dogs and cats are the most common cause of pet allergies. Furry little friends such as guinea pigs, rabbits, birds, mice and rats can also trigger asthma or allergies in some people.

Not only can horses trigger allergies or asthma in their human companions, they can also suffer from asthma-like problems (heaves) themselves.

The best pets for people with asthma and allergies are turtles, hermit crabs, fish or reptiles.

NOT JUST THEIR HAIR

While many people think that the pet's fur or hair is the problem, it isn't the source – although it can carry the allergens.

The main source of allergen in dogs is saliva and in cats are the sebaceous glands in the cat's skin. Dander (shed skin particles) is also a source of allergens.

As all dogs and cats have dander and secretions, all breeds/types can potentially cause allergies. However, some animals may pose less of a risk than others because:

- Some breeds produce less allergen or shed less hair, which can reduce the spread of allergens.
- Smaller dogs generally produce less allergen than larger dogs, simply because they typically produce less saliva and have less skin.
- Short haired cats may pose less risk compared to long haired ones.

Cat allergy is more common (and typically worse) than dog allergy.

Cats lick themselves which helps spread the allergen. The allergen is sticky so it glues itself to hairs, dust particles and parts of the home. Cat allergen can exist for years in homes that no longer have a cat – or have never had one!

www.nationalasthma.org.au **www.sensitivechoice.com.au**

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National Asthma Council Australia
leading the attack against asthma

TIPS FOR LIVING WITH YOUR FAMILY PET

If your pet lives indoors, keeping it out of the bedroom significantly reduces allergen levels in those areas.

You can also try to reduce exposure to allergens:

- Always wash your hands after touching or feeding your pet
- Don't touch your face before washing your hands
- Keep pets off chairs, sofas and other soft furnishings
- Vacuum any carpets, curtains and upholstery regularly using a vacuum with a motorised brush and a HEPA filter
- Clean hard floors with a damp cloth or a steam mop
- Clean air-conditioning and heating ducts
- Wash clothing, and pet and human bedding regularly in hot water
- Groom (e.g. brush) your pet regularly.
- Make sure the person with the allergy doesn't do the vacuuming, dusting or pet grooming – ask them to stay out of the room while it's happening and then for about 20 minutes afterwards while the air settles

Washing your pet dog regularly may also assist; talk to your vet about how often your dog can safely be washed and which product is best to use. A wash once every 3–4 weeks is standard for many dogs. Bathing cats is not recommended, as this can be very stressful for you and the cat.

IF SYMPTOMS PERSIST...

If allergic symptoms persist even after taking these steps, you can try gradually increasing the time the pet is kept outside, making sure they have a secure area with a safe, sheltered home. The RSPCA can provide advice on appropriate environments for outdoor pets.

It may still take some months before allergen levels are reduced, particularly if your pet is a cat.

Unfortunately in some cases where symptoms persist, it may be necessary to move your pet permanently outdoors or to consider re-homing the pet to another family. If you feel that you need to make this decision, please contact your local RSPCA for more advice.

TIPS FOR VISITING FRIENDS OR RELATIVES WITH PETS

If you think you might be allergic to the pet of a friend or relative, try these steps when you visit:

- Ask your friend to keep their pets outside safely out of the way or in another room while you are there
- Remember to take your allergy medicine at least 30 minutes before visiting
- Bring your asthma reliever with you
- Always wash your hands after touching their pet
- Don't touch your face before washing your hands
- Wash your clothing in hot water (above 55°c) to remove allergens after your visit

WHAT ELSE CAN YOU TRY?

Make sure you take your prescribed medicines to help you keep your symptoms under control while you try to reduce your exposure.

You could also ask your doctor about allergen immunotherapy, also known as desensitization, and whether this might be suitable for you.

Interestingly, there is evidence that exposure to pets in infancy may actually decrease the risk of allergies to animals in later life. Talk to your doctor for more information.

FOR THE TECHNICALLY MINDED

The more significant identified pet allergens are:

Allergen	Comments
Fel d 1	A secretoglobin produced in cats by the sebaceous glands (skin) and in the mouth (saliva)
Fel d 4	A lipocalin produced in cats in the mouth (saliva)
Can f 1	A lipocalin produced by dogs in the mouth (saliva)
Can f 2	A lipocalin produced by dogs in the mouth (saliva)

For more information on pet allergies visit ASCIA at www.allergy.org.au

For more information on the care and housing of pets visit the RSPCA Knowledgebase kb.rspca.org.au