



Pet Allergy

Symptoms of pet allergies can be as mild as an occasional sneeze or as severe as respiratory distress. Allergies to pets such as cats, dogs, hamsters, and rabbits affect up to ten percent of the general population and up to thirty percent of asthmatics. Avoidance is difficult at best, treatment is not always fully effective, and many are unwilling to give up a beloved pet that has become part of the family. However, an increased understanding of this important allergy can be invaluable in a successful treatment program.

Sneezing, itchy watering eyes, runny nose, wheezing, and even shortness of breath are all commonly seen with allergy to pet dander (old skin and chemicals that are continually shed). Although any furry animal is capable of producing allergies, cats and dogs are by far the most common domestic pets and therefore the most common cause of pet allergy. Up to seventy percent of households in the United States have a cat or dog and up to ten percent of the population is allergic to pets. Pet allergy is more common in people with asthma. Here are some key points to help you understand the complicated nature of pet allergy:

Pets secrete certain chemicals in their saliva, urine, and skin which are responsible for allergy symptoms in those who are sensitive. As animals lick and shed their skin, these chemicals are spread. Cat dander is easily spread by human contact. Although sticky, it can also become easily airborne into the environment. Levels of cat dander in public places such as schools, churches, and waiting rooms can be dangerously high. Homes without cats can even contain high levels of dander causing symptoms where one would not expect.

While avoidance of the pet causing allergy symptoms is the best treatment, this is not always possible. Other options which can be helpful but less effective:

- Keep the pet out of the bedroom of the person who is allergic. Automatic door closures into the bedroom should be installed and carpet should be removed and substituted with hardwood, tile, or linoleum.

- Frequent vacuuming can help.
- HEPA air filters can be of benefit.
- Bathing dogs and cats can effectively remove dander and the chemicals that cause allergy. Unfortunately, studies have shown that one must bathe a cat every two or three days in order to reduce the level of dander. Cats are often unwilling participants in this endeavor. Chemicals that denature (chemically alter) cat dander such as “tannic acid” have been shown to be of limited benefit.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after handling the pet.
- Do not allow the pet on the furniture or in the car.

If you are allergic to a pet such as a cat that lives in your home, allergy symptoms often lessen over time but do not disappear. Daily therapy with inhaled nasal steroids, non-sedating antihistamines, and even asthma medications can be helpful. Allergies to pets in other homes often cause more severe symptoms. If you must visit a home with a pet to which you are allergic, be sure to take your allergy medications (antihistamines) at least forty minutes before you enter the home. Unknown exposure to pet dander in public places can cause unexpected and severe symptoms. It is important to carry your allergy and/or asthma-rescue medications with you and be aware of your surroundings. People without evidence of a cat or dog allergy often ask to be tested in order to obtain a new pet. Even if you are not allergic to cats or dogs, there is no guarantee that you or your child will not develop symptoms with repeated exposure. If you have severe pollen allergies or symptoms related to one type of pet, it is likely that you will develop allergies to other types of pets over time. While avoidance and medication is the cornerstone of therapy, allergy shots (immunotherapy) can offer additional benefits.