

Pet Allergy

Allergies to pets and other animals are a common cause of allergic rhinitis (hay fever) and asthma. However, up to 50% of people who are allergic to animals do not get immediate symptoms. If there is doubt as to whether a pet is causing allergy symptoms, a clinical immunology/allergy specialist can confirm the suspicion using skin tests or allergen specific IgE allergy tests.

The main source of cat allergen is in the sebaceous glands in the cat's skin

Cats often lick themselves and this helps spread cat allergen, which is sticky, and glues itself to dander, dust particles, and all parts of the home. As all cats have sebaceous glands, all cat breeds can cause allergies.

Cat allergen can remain in the home for up to six months, and in cat's bedding for up to four years. The allergen spreads so much that it can be measured in homes of non-pet owners, and on clothing of co-workers of cat owners. Cat allergen has been detected in the Antarctic, even though cats have never been there.

The main source of dog allergen is saliva

As the main source of dog allergen is saliva, dander (material shed from skin, hair, fur) can spread the allergen. All dog breeds cause allergies, although some do not shed as much dander (and therefore allergen).

Allergies to other animals

Allergies to other animals such as horses, mice, rats, rabbits, guinea pigs and birds are not as common as cat and dog allergy. However, the presence of these allergens from clothing and other items may be sufficient to trigger allergic rhinitis (hay fever), and asthma.

What can be done to prevent pet allergy?

Studies about increased exposure to animals reducing or increasing allergies are ongoing. In people who are already sensitised to animals and have symptoms, avoidance is well documented to prevent or reduce symptoms. Changes that are simple to implement and have been proven to be effective are:

- Do not bring a pet into the home.
- Find an existing pet a new home.
- Do not smoke, as exposure to environmental smoke makes allergies more likely to develop.

Changes that are difficult to implement, or have not yet been proven are:

- Restrict the pet to one area or keep the pet out of the allergic person's bedroom.
- Use high efficiency air cleaners.
- Remove carpet or other reservoirs for allergens from the bedroom.
- Wash pets weekly.

Treatment options

In cases when it is difficult to avoid exposure to an animal, treatment options include medications such as intranasal corticosteroid sprays (INCS), antihistamines and allergen immunotherapy (AIT), also known as desensitisation. AIT should only be initiated by a clinical immunology/allergy specialist.

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