



SHOULD PEOPLE WHO KNOW THEY HAVE ANIMAL ALLERGIES ADOPT A PET?

If you do not currently have a pet and are considering one, and know you, or a family member, are pet-allergic, be sure to consider carefully whether you can live with the allergy before you bring a new pet home. Pet allergies can range from very mild to very serious. Too many allergic people obtain pets without thinking through the challenges of living with them. And too often, they end up relinquishing pets — a decision that is difficult for the owner and can be traumatic for the pet. If you have allergies and have decided to live with an animal, it is important to find an allergist who understands your commitment to living with your pet. Also, find out just how severe your allergy is. You can begin to determine how allergic you are to animals by spending time with friends who have pets.

WHAT IF, DESPITE ALL EFFORTS, ALLERGY SYMPTOMS ARE TOO SEVERE?

Giving up an animal is never easy for the owner or the pet. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you will continue to find your animal triggers your allergies severely. Consult your veterinarian to discuss new strategies. If that doesn't work, and the allergy symptoms remain unbearable, make sure the solution to your problem doesn't create a bigger one for your pet. Try to find a caring and responsible new home, or surrender your pet to our shelter. We will do our best to find your former companion the happy, healthy home he deserves.



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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.

DO ALLERGY SUFFERERS NEED TO GIVE UP THEIR PETS?

Not necessarily! An estimated one-third of North Americans who are allergic to cats live with at least one cat in their household. For many owners, the benefits of pet companionship outweigh the drawbacks of pet allergies. But don't assume that a pet is the source of sniffing and sneezing. Many household particles, such as dust and mould, can cause allergic reactions. See your doctor or an allergist for allergy testing before assuming you are allergic to your pet.

WHAT CAUSES ALLERGIES TO ANIMALS?

Glands in the animal's skin secrete tiny allergy triggering proteins, called allergens. Allergens are present in flakes of dry skin (dander) and the animal's saliva and urine. The allergens may circulate in the air after saliva dries on the animal's fur.

DO SOME BREEDS CAUSE FEWER ALLERGIES THAN OTHERS?

For people who are allergic to animals, most animals, and all cats and dogs, are allergenic (or, allergy-causing). Cats and rabbits tend to be more allergenic than dogs for allergic people, although some people are more sensitive to dogs than cats. Contrary to popular belief, there are no "nonallergenic" breeds of dogs or cats; even hairless breeds may be highly allergenic. There are some breeds of cats and dogs that are considered hypoallergenic, which means they are generally less allergy-causing than other breeds. However, even among breeds, one dog or cat may be more irritating to an individual allergy sufferer than another animal of that same breed.

WHAT ABOUT LONG-HAIRED PETS?

Long-haired animals do not necessarily produce more animal dander than short-haired pets, and it's dander that causes allergies, not hair. Individual pets produce individual amounts of animal dander. It makes no difference whether an animal has short hair, long hair or how much it sheds. Short-haired animals cast off as many allergens into the environment as long-haired ones do.

SHOULD I ADOPT A PET EVEN THOUGH I'M NOT SURE IF MY CHILD IS ALLERGIC TO ANIMALS?

Recent medical studies have shown that children with early exposure to pets were less likely to develop allergies later in life. One study demonstrated that having two or more dogs or cats around during the first year of life actually decreased a child's chances of developing allergies. The theory is that if you expose children in early life to allergens, they build up their immunity to them, much like giving your child a vaccination to prevent a disease.

WHAT CAN I DO TO ALLEVIATE SYMPTOMS?

Symptoms of allergies range from mild to severe. Solutions also vary. You may have to experiment before finding the right combination of steps that work to relieve your symptoms. Here are some good steps to consider:

- Create an allergy free zone in the home — preferably the bedroom — and prohibit your pet's access to it. Use a high-efficiency HEPA air cleaner (available at many hardware stores or discount department stores) in the bedroom.

- Use HEPA air cleaners throughout your home, and avoid dust-and-dander-catching furnishings such as cloth curtains and blinds and carpeted floors. Clean frequently and thoroughly to remove dust and dander, washing articles such as couch covers and pillows, curtains and pet beds. Use a microfilter bag in your vacuum cleaner to effectively catch all the allergens.
- Although products are available that claim to reduce pet allergens when sprayed on the animal's fur, studies show they are less effective than a weekly bath. Even cats can become accustomed to being bathed; check with your veterinarian or consult a good pet care book for directions about how to do this properly, and use the shampoo your veterinarian recommends.
- Remember that allergies are cumulative; that is, your symptoms will increase the more allergens you're exposed to. Many allergy sufferers are sensitive to more than one allergen. So if you're allergic to dust, insecticides, pollen, cigarette smoke and cat dander, you'll need to reduce the overall allergen level in your home by concentrating on all of the causes, not just the pet allergy. For example, during the spring when it's difficult to avoid exposure to pollen, you may need to step up your measures to remove cat dander from your home as well as avoiding cigarette smoke and insecticides.
- Have someone other than the person with allergies clean the litter box and vacuum when the allergic person is out of the house. If this is not possible, the allergic person can reduce exposure by wearing a dust mask.
- Allergy shots (or, immunotherapy) can improve allergy symptoms but cannot eliminate them entirely. The shots work by gradually desensitizing a person's immune system to the pet allergens.
- Additional treatments are available to relieve symptoms, including steroidal and antihistamine nose sprays and antihistamine pills. For asthma, there are multiple medications, sprays and inhalers available.