

Allergic to your cat? Easy tips to prevent and control your allergy

What is an allergy?

An allergy is a reaction that occurs when the **body's natural defenses (immune system) overreact to a foreign substance called an allergen**. Allergens themselves are harmless; it is our body's extreme response to them that causes the unwanted symptoms.

How do allergies develop?

At any age our immune system can create unique proteins called antibodies that are programmed to recognize and respond to a specific allergen, even one that we have been around our entire lives. When this occurs, it is called sensitization. The next time the person is exposed to that allergen, the immune system recognizes it and attacks, causing an allergic reaction with associated symptoms. **Though anyone can develop allergies at anytime**, some families are more prone to them. Individuals do not inherit an allergy to a specific allergen, but the overall likelihood of developing allergies is increased when other family members have allergies.

What are allergens?

Most allergens are proteins. Common sources of allergens include various foods such as peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, fruit, fish, and shellfish. Non-food allergens include pollens, mold spores, dust mites, cockroaches, latex, insect venom (i.e. bee sting), drugs (i.e. penicillin), or animals. **Animal allergens are typically found in urine, saliva, skin, and feces; and can be carried on hair and dander (tiny scales from skin, hair, or feathers).** Allergens from pets are small and lightweight so once in the air, they can remain suspended for long periods of time eventually settling down on carpets, bedding, furniture, and other items in the home. Additionally, people can carry pet allergens on their hair and clothing.

How common are allergies to pets?

It is estimated that 30 to 40 percent of the world's population suffers from one or more allergic disorders and the prevalence of allergic disease has been rising worldwide. Among U.S. citizens of all ages, allergies are the fifth leading cause of chronic diseases, and asthma (often triggered by allergies) is the third most common chronic disease in children under eighteen years old. In addition, the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America reports allergies to pets are very common affecting millions of Americans. An estimated **15 to 30 percent of people with allergies have a reaction to cats or dogs, with cat allergies being twice as common as dog allergies.**

What are the symptoms of pet allergies?

A common misconception regarding pet allergies is that the development of aches and pains or fever is part of the normal allergic response. That is not true. **Pet allergies typically cause nose, eye, skin, and respiratory (lung and throat), symptoms.** These may lead to a decreased quality of life, including difficulty sleeping and a lack of energy.

Nose and eye symptoms:

- Sneezing
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Red, itchy, or watery eyes
- Itchy nose, throat, or roof of mouth

Skin symptoms:

- Dry, itchy skin
- Rashes, hives

Those whose pet allergies trigger allergic bronchitis or asthma, may also develop the following

Respiratory symptoms:

- Cough
- Wheezing (whistling sound) when breathing
- Chest tightness
- Shortness of breath

In extreme pet allergy cases, a severe reaction can occur, known as **anaphylaxis**, in which the allergic individual may experience itching, hives, swelling, respiratory distress, shock, and even death.

In general, symptoms will worsen when a person is exposed to greater amounts of allergens or when several different types are present. Therefore, reducing the exposure to allergens can reduce the severity of the symptoms.

If I am allergic, can I still have a pet?

There are many options for controlling and reducing allergies through reduction of exposure to allergens and/or treatment of symptoms. **Therefore, most people are able to keep their pets while managing their allergies.**

What should I do if I think I have allergies to my pet?

Some people assume they have a pet allergy based on their symptoms, it is important to see your doctor in order to be certain that you are directing allergy prevention strategies, like those detailed here, at the correct cause of your symptoms.



MYTH: Cat fur is an allergen.

FACT: Oil glands in the skin and the salivary glands produce the primary cat allergen. Allergies to cats are primarily caused by a single protein which is found on the skin and in the saliva. There are at least seven other cat proteins that may cause cat allergies in humans. A combination of these allergy producing proteins accumulate on the fur and skin of the cat during grooming. Allergens are then released into the environment as the cat sheds dander (tiny scales from skin, hair or feathers), exposing humans to the potential hazard.

MYTH: Allergens are equally distributed across the cat's body.

FACT: The highest concentration of allergens is found on the face and neck due to the combination of oil glands in that area. These allergens may then be spread across the body by regular licking and grooming, and can then be transferred as the cat rubs its face against a person or a piece of furniture.

MYTH: Some cats do not produce allergens.

FACT: All cats produce allergens, but some cats may produce more or less than others. The types and amount of cat allergen produced can vary significantly between individual cats, and people may react more severely to one particular cat over another. Such differences in allergen production are not related to the length of hair or breed of cat. However, there is evidence that intact male cats produce more allergens and that these levels decrease after neutering. This is yet another reason to make sure to have your cat spayed or neutered. Additionally, since all cats produce at least one type of allergen, hypoallergenic (low allergen-producing cats) and allergen free cats do not exist.

Reduce your exposure to allergens by following the allergy prevention tips below.

Reducing the amount of allergens in your household can dramatically reduce symptoms of allergies. Best results in reducing allergens are found when the recommendations listed here are applied consistently over time. It may take weeks before results are noticed.

Can medical treatment help?

When reducing allergen exposure is not enough, there are many options for controlling allergies and reducing symptoms through medical management. Depending on the severity of signs, over the counter (OTC) medicines may provide temporary allergy relief for symptoms such as runny/itchy nose and throat, sneezing and itchy/watery eyes. **In all cases, talking with your doctor is highly recommended; as some people may benefit from prescription medicine, allergy immunotherapy (allergy shots), or other medical treatments.** Some with severe allergies and asthma may be discouraged from owning pets; however, most people can effectively manage their symptoms.

What should I do if I cannot keep my cat?

Unfortunately, even after implementing these recommendations, it is possible that your allergy is severe enough that you may need to find a new home for your cat. **Ask family and friends about placement options before contacting your local animal shelter.** It is also important to understand that having an allergy to one type of animal increases your risk of allergy to another, but it does not guarantee it. Many people are allergic to cats, but are not necessarily allergic to other common pet species.



Cat Specific Controls:

- Spay or neuter your cat, as this decreases allergen production.
- Avoid owning a high number of cats because the more cats present, the higher the concentration of allergens in the household.
- Bathe your cat weekly, if possible, as this can decrease the concentration of allergen by up to 84 percent. For your cat's health use a shampoo formulated for pets; all brands tested perform equally well at reducing allergens.
- Always wash your hands immediately after handling your pet.

General Household Controls:

- Restrict cats from rooms where reduced exposure is desired (e.g., bedrooms). Airborne cat allergen levels have been found to be much higher in rooms where cats are physically present.
- When possible, replace carpet with smooth flooring (e.g., wood, tile, linoleum) as carpets are the primary reservoir of allergens in the home. Carpets can contain 13 times more cat allergens than smooth floors.

- Allergic individuals should avoid cleaning and vacuuming themselves, or wear a disposable dust mask (available at the local pharmacy or hardware store) in order to prevent inhalation of pet allergens. After cleaning, it will take a few hours for allergens released into the air to settle back onto the surfaces.
- In addition to using a HEPA filter in household heating and cooling systems, the use of an air purifier with a HEPA filter in the room where pets spend the most of their time will further reduce the concentration of allergens up to five to seven-fold.
- Vacuum regularly, at least once a week, with a good vacuum cleaner that is equipped with a HEPA filter to prevent outflow of the contents (including pet allergens) that have been swept up.
- Avoid "dry" cleaning (brooms and feather dusters) which can aerosolize pet allergens. Instead use statically charged cleaning products (eg swiffer) and/or clean with wet supplies such as damp cloths and mops which will trap and remove allergens.
- When laundering bedding, clothing, and other washable items (including cat beds) use high temperatures and detergents to remove more allergens.