

## Pets and Allergies

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### Simple steps to avoid the discomfort of allergies.

The good news is that if you own a pet and suffer from allergies your reaction is most likely to be mild. There are also many things that can be done to help.

What's more, research has even shown that children who live with a cat or dog in their early years can be protected from developing allergies whether to pets, dust mites or pollen<sup>1</sup>. This is in addition to the many other benefits pets bring, including companionship, stress reduction and educational stimulus.

Given these facts it is not surprising that most pet owners will put up with some discomfort. So what do you need to know and what can you do?

#### WHAT IS AN ALLERGY?

An allergy is an over sensitivity to a particular substance, which then produces certain symptoms when inhaled, eaten or touched. The substance you are allergic to is known as an 'allergen', and the symptoms are called an 'allergic reaction'. Common allergies can be triggered by pollen (hayfever/asthma), house dust mite, pets, fungi, moulds, foods and skin irritants.

You can identify an allergic reaction by a number of symptoms including itching, sneezing, wheezing, itchy or runny nose, watering eyes or skin rashes and irritation. During an allergic reaction, the body produces an antibody called immunoglobulin E (or IgE). This chemical tries to defend the body from the invading particles, or allergens, but in the process reacts with cells in the body, causing another chemical, histamine, to be released. Histamine is the main cause of the symptoms seen in an allergic reaction.



#### ARE ALLERGIES INCREASING?

It is estimated that one in four people suffer from allergies, and this figure is expected to rise. Lots of research is underway but it is generally accepted that, like our muscles, our immune system needs exercise – something that it is not getting through modern living.

Contact with very mild infections, e.g. by playing outdoors with a pet, can help to develop

a robust immune system and act as a 'natural vaccine', thus protecting against allergies and other minor ailments.

Reduced ventilation and increased central heating seem to worsen the problem, allowing dust and other allergen particles to settle.

#### WHY PETS?

Of the one in four people who suffer from allergies in the UK only 10 per cent suffer from allergies to pets. These are normally caused by an allergic reaction to minute particles of fur and skin, known as 'dander'. The particles contain proteins from the skin or saliva that have dried on the pet's fur after grooming, these can be transferred to bedding, carpets and other soft furnishings. When inhaled by humans from the air, dander can cause allergic symptoms similar to those caused by pollen or dust mite allergies, primarily in the nose or eyes. Some people may develop a skin rash.

#### HOW CAN PETS HELP ALLERGIES?

Research shows that living with a dog or a cat in the first year of life can protect you from developing allergies to various allergens, including pets. This is because exposure to infection is known to build up your immune system, better preparing it to fight off allergies.



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This is reassuring for parents, as pets are actually 'doing more good than harm'. If the child is in contact with pets from the day it is born, the pets are helping to reduce the risk of allergies, while developing the child in many other ways.

### HOW DO YOU KNOW IF THE PET IS A TRIGGER?

With a severe reaction it is quite clear you will start to react as soon as you come into contact with the pet, or enter a room where the pet has been. Even being with people who have had contact with pets can bring on a reaction.

However, if you have milder reactions, it may be useful to keep a diary of symptoms and activities listing such things as cleaning, dusting, changing the bed linen and playing with the pet. Remember though, your doctor or pharmacist will help you make a diagnosis, as care will need to be taken interpreting the results. Soft furnishings can harbour several possible allergens, and cleaning pet's bedding may cause a reaction to either the dust mites or dander.

### ARE SOME PETS BETTER THAN OTHERS?

It depends on the nature of the allergic reaction. Dogs are usually less likely to cause a reaction than cats, because cats tend to lick their coat more.

The breed of cat or dog can make a difference to some allergies although, unfortunately, generally not to asthma sufferers. Some people have found poodles to be less allergenic than other breeds of dog as their coat is more like wool than fur. Similarly, furless Rex cats do seem to be better for some sufferers.

However, every reaction is individual and as a result there is no hard and fast rule. The general guide though is that pets that moult less fur are less likely to cause a reaction.

### CAN AN ALLERGY TO A PET BE TREATED?

The good news is that allergies can be treated. Products, such as antihistamines, available from your pharmacist, can help relieve most mild to moderate symptoms. Other treatments are available and recently a vaccine has been developed which may help prevent symptoms developing in the first place, although it wouldn't necessarily prevent sensitivity developing.

Unfortunately asthma sufferers currently cannot be desensitised, so where possible it is best to avoid sensitisation, an area where pets have been shown to help.

If you have particular questions about your allergy contact your health professional.

### HINTS AND TIPS ON CARING FOR A PET

If you are mildly allergic to your pet, there are many things you can do to reduce the symptoms. Here is the PHC checklist:

- Try to keep your pets away from soft furnishings such as sofas, cushions, pillows and beds.
- Soft furnishings can carry dust mites and other allergens. Once such items contain dust or skin scales it can take months and even years for the levels to decline. You'll probably find the best way to clean is to vacuum mattresses and sofas. Machine washing your pets bedding and your own bed linen regularly at no less than 60°C, is very worthwhile.
- Use a modern, bagless vacuum cleaner with cyclical air filtration and leave doors and windows open for at least two hours after cleaning.
- It is worth noting that house dust mite faeces is the most common allergen and mites are particularly fond of foam backed carpet – a square metre can contain up to 1.5 million mites.
- You should try to keep pets out of the bedroom. If they enter the bedroom, ensure that you keep them away from the pillows and the areas where your head lies.
- Regular brushing of your pet will help to reduce the amount of dust it carries. Grooming your pet outdoors will help keep the dust outside – you may find using a nose and mouth mask helps.
- Keeping yourself clean also helps; wash your hands after playing with the pet and change into clean clothes after grooming your pet.
- Don't forget to clean your pet's living area too!

#### References

- 1 The Lancet, Vol. 355, May 20 2000
- 2 British Allergy Foundation 2000

**Remember a healthy pet is  
a happy pet and a happy pet  
means a happy owner!**

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