
THE "INFO"-HALER



TAKE IN THE INFORMATION

An easy to understand, informative newsletter for our patients of all ages from the
Allergy & Asthma Associates of Michigan, P.C.

PET ALLERGIES

Are pets wonderful??? Surely they must be since more than half of all homes in the U.S.A have them. Latest statistics show that there are more than 100,000,000 cats, dogs, birds, hamsters, rabbits, rats, guinea pigs, and mice living as pets in U.S. homes. Pets provide companionship, security, comfort, and entertainment. They teach children valuable lessons about life, death, reproduction, and responsibility. Pet owners become so emotionally involved with their pets, that the pets are considered to be part of the family. Some extremists have gone so far as to say, "take anything (including spouse, children, etc.), but don't take my _____ (pet)!" So, needless to say, the issue of pets versus allergies is a very highly charged emotional issue. We, at the Allergy Center, respect the love of pets, but feel it is important to communicate the facts about pet allergies.

In the U.S. today, a significant percentage of the general population and 30% of the asthmatic population are allergic to cats and dogs. Over ten million people have cat allergies (the number one pet allergy in the U.S.A.). More than one-third of all the people allergic to cats have at least one, and many have two or more, cats in their home. Current research has found that in the past decade there are more cats in American homes than ever before. Cats seem to be preferred since they can be left alone, they ration their own food, and they don't require walking, exercising, and being let out several times per day. However, the number of cat allergy and cat asthma cases has also dramatically increased in the past decade. Many allergy prone people have become allergic to cats from increased exposure over time. Statistics show that after a person develops allergies to one type of animal, they have increased likelihood of developing allergies to other animals as well. Pet allergens may stay in a home for months after the pet is gone because they remain in house dust.

There is no such thing as a non allergenic animal. Animal substances that cause the allergic reactions are saliva, sebaceous oil glands in the skin and hair roots, dander (scaly particles like dandruff on animals and birds), feathers, fur, urine, and excrement. Current research has proven that people are most allergic to the proteins in the saliva of cats and dogs. Since both pets lick themselves, saliva is spread to the fur and dander of pets where it dries and later becomes airborne. Since cats are remarkable preeners, and spend most of their time indoors, cat saliva can be found on all furniture, walls, carpets, etc. Also, since cats tend to be held more than dogs, the saliva is easily transferable to people's clothes, skin, and respiratory tract. There is no particular breed of cat or dog that is better than another.

It appears that with most rodents, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs, etc. it is the protein in the pet's urine that causes the allergic response in people.

Bird allergies, on the other hand, are caused by bird droppings and bird feathers. In general, the droppings of all animals if left to sit become perfect environments for bacteria, mold, fungus and dust. Bird feathers are specialized extensions of the skin of birds and are composed of epithelial cells which are great sources of food for the dust mite. So, although most people are not allergic to the feathers themselves, they are allergic to the dust mites that live in the feathers. Therefore, feather and down pillows, comforters, jackets, and sleeping bags may trigger allergic reactions in some people. Also, clothing made of mohair, alpaca, cashmere, or goat hair, and furniture stuffed with horse hair or feathers may also cause problems for a select few. Furry pets, such as cats and dogs, that run through fields outdoors and roll in the grass, pick up many outdoor pollens in their fur which again causes allergic reactions in sensitive people.

Allergic reactions from exposure to animals vary in intensity depending on the degree of exposure and the severity of the allergy. All people with animal allergies, however, have the potential for a serious, and possibly life threatening, allergic reaction.

Symptoms from animal exposure range from a runny nose with sneezing, to eye irritation with swelling, to generalized itching, hives, shortness of breath, and wheezing. Symptoms usually develop immediately after exposure to the pet, but for some people, they may build up over several hours and become most severe about twelve hours after contact with the animal.

The best treatment for animal allergies is total avoidance. People with serious pet allergies should not own pets! Avoidance is the safest and most effective way to deal with the allergy problem. If, however, avoidance is not possible, the following suggestions may help to minimize the degree of exposure: keep pets outdoors whenever possible, keep indoor pets out of bedrooms, cars, and frequently used rooms, wash hands thoroughly after contact with pets, have a non-allergic person bathe (water only is necessary) and groom pet weekly outdoors, never hug or kiss your pets, have a non-allergic person clean the pet's litter box, bedding, cage, etc., reduce the amount of carpeting in the home and vacuum existing carpet with a HEPA filter vacuum weekly, wash all bedding (people and pets) weekly in hot water, use home or room air cleaners to help eliminate airborne allergens, clean heat ducts and keep filters over the vents, and encase mattresses, pillows, and upholstered furniture in plastic.

If, after the preceding environmental control measures have been implemented, symptoms persist, then medications may be prescribed to control symptoms associated with occasional exposure. If medication provides limited relief, people with intermittent, unavoidable exposure to animals may also be candidates for immunotherapy (allergy injections). Allergy injections for pet desensitization are expensive, inconvenient, and potentially dangerous. They should be reserved for people with severe pet allergies who have made serious attempts to limit environmental contact. The injections are highly successful for many individuals, but for those people who continue to have daily exposure to pets, the full benefit of the therapy may never be realized.

If you are an allergic individual and cannot live without a pet, then the safest pets to have are tropical fish (may increase water vapor in the house and contribute to mold growth), snakes, lizards, turtles, salamanders, ants, frogs, spiders, tortoises, hermit crabs, and "pet rocks". These pets do not shed dander, do not have hair or fur to carry pollens, and their excrement does not cause allergic reactions.

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