



## **How to Deal with Cat and Dog Allergy**

Some degree of cat or dog allergy occurs in as much as 15% of the population at some time in their lives. It tends to be more severe in the young adult years and varies greatly in severity. Some people get only itchy eyes on close contact with an animal and no treatment is necessary. Others can get severe nasal congestion and asthma on only brief contact with an animal. In general, cats produce much more severe allergy than dogs, but this does not hold true for everyone.

Cat and dog allergy is caused by a protein (an allergen) that is secreted by glands in the skin. Salivary glands also produce a similar protein. People are never allergic to the hair of the animal. Allergen gets carried in the air on very small particles that you cannot see. Particles deposit on the lining of your eyes (conjunctiva) and nose, and also are inhaled directly into your lungs. Contact with your skin will also cause itching and hives.

All allergies tend to be variable from week to week, and also over a period of years. Your allergic reaction to a cat or dog will be much more severe if other kinds of allergen (such as seasonal pollen or dust mites) are also causing symptoms. Viral infections can sometimes aggravate your animal allergy for many weeks. There is also an individual variability in what part of your body is most severely affected; some people might be predominately bothered in their eyes and nose, while other people may have predominately an asthmatic reaction. When you are exposed to an animal intermittently, your allergic symptoms can come on very quickly (within minutes), or the symptoms may build up slowly over a number of hours peaking 12 hours later. If you are living with an animal, then the relationship between the animal and your symptoms may not be obvious to you. If you are inhaling small amounts of animal allergen for 8-12 hours a day, the result may be a chronic inflammation in your air passages that would take a number of weeks to totally disappear once you are in an animal-free environment. If you are allergic to other indoor allergens such as dust mite or cockroaches, your symptoms might also be partially affected by these things.

The diagnosis of animal allergy is usually made with the assistance of a skin test. A blood test (such as RAST or immunoCAP) can also be done but it is not as sensitive as the skin test usually.

### **TREATMENT OF CAT AND DOG ALLERGY**

#### **1) Environmental Control**

A cat or dog produces a certain amount of allergen per day. This amount varies greatly from animal to animal (as far as we know, there is not any particular breed of cat or dog that is better than any other). You may have more trouble from one cat than another. Individual variation between animals and perhaps the size of the animal is more important than breed. One particularly troublesome aspect of animal allergy is that the allergen progressively accumulates in reservoirs such as carpeting, mattresses, and sticks on vertical and horizontal surfaces of a room. The amount of allergen in the air varies greatly depending on the disturbance of the air and the agitation of the reservoirs. This is why air filtration is of limited value. It is important to clean off surfaces with a damp cloth and wash curtains and other fabric within a room. Of particular concern are cushions, mattresses, and carpeting that cannot be easily cleaned. The particles that cause allergy go right through the fabrics so it is helpful to enclose mattresses and cushions with a plastic cover that zips closed to prevent allergen from coming out when

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cushions are squeezed. Carpeting is more of a problem and it is, of course, best to have scatter rugs that can be taken up and cleaned. Vacuuming is of limited value, because it does not remove allergen that accumulates in reservoirs. Vacuum cleaners that have filters might be of some limited value in preventing particles that are vacuumed up from passing through the vacuum cleaner. Cleaning wall-to-wall carpeting might also be of some benefit.

The best treatment of cat and dog allergy is to remove the animal from the indoor environment and avoid other kinds of contact where possible. Studies have shown that in spite of the existence of large reservoirs that contain allergen, the quantity of animal allergen in the indoor air will decline slowly over a period of weeks to months following removal of the animal.

If you decide to keep an animal, to which you are allergic, then it should be restricted as much as possible within the home, and it should be kept totally out of the bedroom. Washing an animal weekly may reduce the amount of allergen that is given off into the environment. You should consult with your veterinarian for advice regarding care of your animal's fur to prevent excessive dryness if you are washing regularly. Sprays that are sold to inactivate allergy from the surface of the pelt probably have limited effectiveness.

### 2) Medication

Your doctor will discuss with you various kinds of medications that can be used to control your allergy. Medications can be taken to either prevent symptoms when you are exposed or to treat symptoms that occur on unavoidable or unexpected exposure. One concern about the use of effective medication is it may permit you to stay much longer in an unhealthy environment. Even a very effective medication may not adequately suppress severe allergic symptoms if the exposure is prolonged. In other words, medication may give you a false sense of security but you may be worse off in the long run for exposing yourself constantly. Many people with milder forms of animal allergy can be adequately treated without long-term adverse effect even in the presence of continuous exposure. Some people reach an accommodation with the constant presence of an animal and their symptoms do not get progressively worse.

### 3) Immunotherapy or "Desensitization" Shots for Cat and Dog Allergy

This is a form of therapy that has a beneficial effect over a period of many months in a certain percentage of people. The success rate of immunotherapy in cat and dog allergy is probably much greater if you do not have constant exposure to the animal in your environment. This therapy tends to work better to protect you against unavoidable intermittent exposure, than to reduce chronic symptoms produced by living with an animal. Immunotherapy has important side effects, which can be severe. For these reasons, it is usually not considered until the effects of environmental control and medication are fully evident. Your doctor will need to discuss the pros and cons of this therapy with you before it is started.