

Allergy Clinic, P.A.

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PET ALLERGY

Household pets including cats, dogs, rodents, and birds can present special problems for people with allergies. Many people with cat allergies think they are allergic to the animal's fur. It is actually a protein within the pet's saliva and dander (skin flakes) that is the cause of their trouble. When cats groom themselves, they deposit saliva onto their fur and skin. Large amounts of dander become airborne when the animal rubs against furniture and when you brush or pet them. This substance is very difficult to remove from an environment. Dander also contributes to another allergy problem. It serves as a food supply for dust mites. Although the fur of a dog or cat is not a major allergen, it will collect pollen, dust, mold, and other irritants.

Someone with allergies or asthma should not keep a pet in their house. Although it is both physically and emotionally difficult, finding the pet a new home, is the best solution. Even isolating the pet to a small area or keeping the pet outdoors does not guarantee a dander-free home. Air currents from central heating and air conditioning or fans, will spread pet allergen throughout the house. Dander can also be brought back in on the body and clothing of other people.

CAT ALLERGY

An estimated 6 million Americans are allergic to cats and approximately one third of them have cats in their home. Allergic reactions to cats can range from inflammation of the nose and eyes to asthma attacks. Although the most effective treatment is removal of the pet, recent scientific studies have shown that steps can be taken in homes with cats to significantly decrease one's exposure to cat allergen.



Cat allergen, the allergy-causing material from cats, becomes airborne as microscopic particles which, when inhaled into the nose or lungs can produce allergic symptoms. Although individual cats may produce more or less allergen, there is no relationship between the pet's hair length and allergen production. There is also no such thing as a non-allergic breed.

Cat allergen is present to the greatest extent in homes with cats, but has also been found in homes where cats have never been present and in offices and public spaces where animals are not allowed. Cat allergen is particularly sticky and is carried on clothing. It is almost impossible not to be exposed to some level of cat allergen. Of course, the levels of exposure will be much higher where cats are present, and these levels are more likely to cause allergy symptoms.

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REDUCING EXPOSURE TO CAT ALLERGEN

As mentioned earlier, the best way to reduce exposure to cat allergen is to find a new home for the pet. If this is unacceptable, the cat should be strictly kept out of the allergic patient's bedroom.

The Bedroom

Soft furnishings in the bedroom such as carpets, upholstered furniture and mattresses will hold cat allergen even after a cat has been removed from the home or banished from the bedroom. This allergen will become airborne if the soft material is disturbed. It can take as long as 20 weeks for cat allergen in carpets to decrease to levels found in homes without a cat and years for cat allergen in mattresses to do so. Removal of the bedroom carpet and encasing of the mattress will eliminate continued exposure to these reservoirs of allergen.

The Carpet

If carpet cannot be removed, it should be thoroughly vacuumed and then sprayed with a solution to help denature the remaining allergen. When carpet containing cat allergen is vacuumed, the tiny allergen particles pass through the standard bags of many vacuum cleaners and are blown out the exhaust into the air. Vacuum cleaners shown to have high allergen containment should be used.

Vent Filters

If a cat is present indoors, ventilation of the house by opening windows and using exhaust fans will decrease airborne cat allergen. Cat allergen particles are particularly small (1/10 the size of dust mite allergen) and therefore, remain airborne for prolonged periods of time. If the cat is limited to a single area of the house, keep in mind that allergen can be spread by air flowing through duct system. Allergen can be trapped from flowing through the duct system by using efficient vent and furnace filters. Finally, walls should be cleaned as cat allergen also adheres to vertical surfaces.

Air Filters

When windows are closed, high efficiency air cleaners do a good job removing cat allergen from the air. Care should be taken that the exhaust from the air cleaner is not directed towards any carpets or soft furnishings so as not to disturb allergens that may have settled there.

Cleaning Your Pet

Studies have demonstrated that washing cats with water does remove much of their surface allergen. However, it is not clear if this reduction persists long enough to reduce symptoms.