

Pet Allergy Frequently Asked Questions

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Q 1: What pets and other animals can cause allergic reactions?

Allergies to pets and other animals are a common cause of allergic rhinitis (hay fever) and asthma. When people who are allergic to animals are around them, up to 50% will not get symptoms straight away. It can therefore be hard to work out what is causing symptoms.

The main cat allergen is a sticky substance produced by sebaceous glands in the cat's skin, that glues itself to dander (tiny flecks of skin), dust and all parts of the home. Cats often lick themselves and this helps spread cat allergen. Cat allergen can remain in the home for up to six months, and in cat's bedding for up to four years. The allergen can also spread into other places including homes of people who do not own cats. As all cats have sebaceous glands, all cat breeds can cause allergies.

The main source of dog allergen is saliva, which can be spread by dander. All dog breeds cause allergies, although some do not shed as much dander, and therefore less allergen is spread.

Allergens from other animals such as horses, mice, rats, rabbits, guinea pigs and birds can trigger allergic rhinitis and asthma but are not as common as cat and dog allergy.

A clinical immunology/allergy specialist can diagnose pet allergy using skin or blood tests called allergen specific IgE allergy tests.

Q 2: How can allergic reactions to pets and other animals be managed?

People who are sensitised to animals and get allergy symptoms from being around them can prevent or reduce symptoms by avoiding animals. For example:

- Do not bring a pet into the home.
- Find an existing pet a new home.

If this isn't possible the following changes may help, but have not been proven:

- Keep the pet out of the allergic person's bedroom.
- Remove carpet from the bedroom, if possible.
- Restrict the pet to one area of the home.
- Use high efficiency vacuum cleaners.
- Wash pets weekly.

Q 3: What are the treatment options for pet allergy?

When it is hard to avoid being around animals, some treatments can be used. These include intranasal corticosteroid sprays, antihistamines and allergen immunotherapy (desensitisation).

Allergen immunotherapy should only be initiated by a clinical immunology/allergy specialist.

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