

Allergies to cats

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Does your beloved cat make your eyes itch and your nose run? If so, you aren't alone – in fact, an estimated one in ten cat owners display some allergic reaction to their feline friends. Shelter workers affirm that owner allergies constitute one of the major reasons why so many pets are abandoned at animal shelters each year.

But many cat lovers who suffer from allergies still manage to live with their pets. What's their secret? Allergy experts offer a variety of suggestions for ways to reduce both the allergen in a house and a person's sensitivity to it.

The first step is understanding the allergy. Allergic people react to secretions from a cat's sebaceous glands, located in the skin and especially near the base of the tail. These secretions dry into particles of allergen so tiny they remain airborne for long periods without settling out of the air. In fact, cat allergen particles are roughly the same size as the aerosol medicine droplets in inhalers, which are designed to penetrate deep into the lungs. This explains why the particles cause such a reaction in sensitive people.

"Allergens are so small that they can stay airborne for a long time and because they are sticky, they adhere to walls, clothing and heating and cooling ducts," says Bonnie Eiche of the Asthma and Allergy Foundation. In fact, cat allergen has been detected in doctor's offices, classrooms and other areas which have never seen a cat. Since allergens can persist so long in a home, getting rid of a pet cat doesn't always solve the problem for allergy sufferers. Finding ways to control allergies makes more sense, allowing people to live in comfort and still keep their beloved pets.

Since the allergen is so sticky, an important step in managing cat allergies is to control the surfaces to which it sticks. Carpeting and upholstery harbor allergen, so experts recommend switching to smooth hardwood floors and leather furniture which can be wiped clean. If such a switch is impractical, many allergy sufferers report relief from covering their furniture with removable coverings which they frequently launder. Stuffed animals also harbor allergen and should be washed on a regular basis. Frequent dusting and washing walls removes the particles which stick to these surfaces.

Steam cleaning carpets every three months also reduces the allergen in a room. But beware of vacuuming, which can cause the tiny particles to fly into the air and actually aggravate allergies. Allergy experts recommend special HEPA vacuums for allergy sufferers, which are designed to catch these small particles.

Air filtration removes allergen particles in the air. Look for a HEPA filter, which is specially designed to trap particles as tiny as cat allergen. Allergists recommend placing a HEPA filter in an allergic person's bedroom, and perhaps another in the room in which the person spends the most time. Simply airing out the house helps also – many allergy sufferers open the windows every chance they get to cleanse their house of allergen particles.

According to the Atlanta Allergy and Asthma Clinic, another important step is managing allergies is to maintain the bedroom as a "safe zone." They recommend keeping pets out of the bedroom and especially from sleeping on the bed. Encase mattresses and pillows in airtight, washable casings and launder bedding frequently. Many people find cat allergies easier to live with if they're not bothered by them while they sleep.

Another way to reduce the amount of allergen in a house is to treat the cats directly. Washing a cat once a week in plain warm water, or saturating the fur with a commercial product like Allerpet, drastically reduces the amount of allergen the cat sheds. Neutering a male cat also makes a significant difference in allergen production.

Many allergy sufferers find relief through allergy shots and other medications. Although they take a while to work, allergy shots can offer some relief to as many as 80% of people allergic to cats. Other people use homeopathic solutions found in health food store, which naturally increase tolerance to cat dander. A professional allergist can suggest other ways to medically control an allergy.

Finally, remember that few people are allergic only to cats. Allergies to pollen, dust or mold can aggravate an allergic reaction to cat dander. Controlling allergies in general is important to managing an allergy to the pet cat. For example, one Open Your Heart volunteer reports that dusty cat litter aggravates her allergies more than the cats themselves. Switching to a less dusty brand of litter has helped make her more comfortable.

Inevitably, cat lovers who suffer from allergies will do more laundry and dust more frequently than pet owners without allergies. But they reap benefits from their hard work – tidy, clean houses, and a purring bundle of love to share their lap at the end of the day!