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Q&A: Living with a Pet Allergy

What is a pet allergy?

Pet or animal allergy refers to a specific allergic immune response to one or any number of proteins found in the skin, fur, saliva and/or urine of animals. It can manifest as a classic runny, itchy, sneezy, and swollen nose (rhinitis), sinus congestion (sinusitis) and/or eye irritation (conjunctivitis); but it can also affect the lung (asthma), ears and Eustachian tube drainage (otitis), and the skin in the form of hives (urticaria) or rashes (eczema).

Can I be allergic to a pet if I've never owned one?

Yes. Particularly in the case of common pets such as cats or dogs. While our immune system must first be introduced to an animal before developing an allergy, people are usually exposed to pet protein over the years at friends and relatives' homes, hotel rooms and even in buildings that have never had pets. Studies show that cat protein is particularly problematic and is found in most homes, places of work, schools, and daycare centers by way of pet owners clothing. Pet protein can also last for years, up to 2 years in furnishings and on walls, and up to 5 years in mattresses! Unfortunately, pet allergy can develop at any time, even after years of owning one, and can remain active for decades to a lifetime.

My pet is family. What options do I have for managing my pet allergy?

While complete avoidance (i.e., giving the pet away) is the best solution, it is rarely practical and almost never a preferred option. I generally reserve that recommendation for the most severe cases when medical therapy and attempts to minimize exposure have failed. Remember that allergies are additive, so an allergic person will have increased symptoms to a pet if they are around more than one and if they are in a dusty carpeted house or if they are in the midst of a high pollen or mold season. Minimizing all allergic triggers, especially in the bedroom where we spend up to a third of our lives, goes a long way.

Current effective medical treatments for pet allergy can range from over the counter (OTC) antihistamine products, to prescription medications, to allergy shots. It is reasonable for a mildly allergic person to start with a low potency OTC antihistamine such as loratadine (aka Claritin, Alavert) and may try OTC ketotifen fumarate eye drops (Zaditor) if needed. If no improvement then OTC cetirizine (Zyrtec) is a good choice because it is stronger and lasts 24 hours, but it may produce side effects such as fatigue. If OTC allergy medications and environmental control measures are not helpful, then you may suffer from multiple or severe allergies, or some other problem. If your doctor suspects that your problem is an allergy, consider a consultation with a board-certified allergist to objectively test and provide you with an individual treatment plan based on your allergic profile.

What about a hypoallergenic pet?

Indoor pet allergen concentration and an individual's sensitivity to a pet allergen are more important than the pet itself. Also, living with a pet over time may allow for tolerance to your pet but not others, even of the same breed. While there are no true non-allergenic pets, some pets do produce more allergen than others, usually by way of shedding or simply as a function of size and cleanliness. For example, a small, carpeted home with a small dirty "hypoallergenic dog" may have more allergen than a large clean home with wood flooring and a large shedding dog. Surprisingly, any pet can be a "hypoallergenic pet" with twice weekly bathing and good housekeeping. Also ask the vet about pet skin care to minimize dryness, flaking and shedding.

What are control measures?

When moving to a new home, inquire about previous pets and assume that all rentals, regardless of pet policies, have had their share. It is optimal to remove carpeting (starting with the bedroom) and replace it with wood or tile. Professionally clean any remaining carpet, walls, fixtures, and air ducts even if you are bringing another pet into the home.

Plan to maintain a high level of cleanliness which includes frequent washing of fabrics, covering mattresses and pillows with allergen encasings, installing HEPA filters centrally and in the bedroom, using HEPA vacuums regularly (e.g. Dyson's pet model), duct cleaning every 5 years (minimum) and gauging humidity between 35-45%. Keep pets off the furniture and opt for leather or vinyl upholstery at home and in the car. If employing a housekeeping service, insist on them using your personal HEPA vacuum rather than theirs, which is likely not HEPA grade and full of allergens from elsewhere.

When travelling, minimize exposures by requesting a hypoallergenic hotel room. A vacation away from pets may alleviate allergic symptoms, so remember to resume your allergy regimen a few days before you return. Allergy medicine always works better preventatively than after the fact.

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