

Cat Allergies: The Facts

Between 5 and 10% of the human population has at least some sensitivity to cats. When people come into contact with a cat to which they are sensitive, they may experience a wide range of symptoms, from eye irritation and swelling, or minor sniffing and sneezing, to potentially life-threatening asthma attacks.

Although allergic reactions to cats tend to appear in early adulthood, one can develop the allergy at any time in life. In some cat-allergic people, the reaction happens almost instantaneously. Others may experience an extended delay (between 4-8 hours) between exposure and reaction. The duration of symptoms may be anywhere from a few minutes to persistence of much longer periods.

Recent studies indicate that childhood exposure to cats may actually reduce the risk of allergic disease such as asthma. So does breast-feeding of infants.

What Are Cat Allergens?

There are seven known cat allergens. They are shed in saliva, skin secretions, and, to some extent, in urine. The major cat allergen is a protein called “Fel d 1” that is secreted primarily in the cat’s saliva and skin, and transmitted throughout the coat during grooming. Dried skin particles (commonly referred to as dander) may contain the offending protein, although it is important to remember that the allergen is not an integral part of dander or the coat itself.

A major obstacle in helping cat guardians is that the protein particles in question are so small that they can hang suspended in the air and are thus easily inhaled. Another hurdle is that the particles are sticky and will cling or settle on any porous surface, including draperies, upholstered furniture and bedding, even walls and ceilings. Because cat allergen is so tiny and light, it lingers in the home for long periods and has even been discovered in homes up to six months after the offending cat has been removed (as well as in homes where a cat had never even lived!)

Are Some Breeds “Safe” for People with Cat Allergies?

Actually, the amount of allergen present does not differ from breed to breed. Shorthaired cats appear to produce similar amounts of allergen as their longhaired cousins. One study did suggest that lightcolored cats may be somewhat less allergenic than darkcolored cats. Others claim no difference. Unfortunately, besides trial and error, there is no positive way of identifying a cat that will set off symptoms. Each cat is an individual as to how much allergen they produce. That’s why an allergy sufferer may have widely differing reactions from one cat to another. Just because one might have had a good, low reaction experience with one Siamese cat does not mean that all Siamese can be tolerated.

Are Hairless Cats Hypoallergenic?

Sorry, no. Even the Sphinx, a “hairless” breed, has a fine downy coat, and since these cats still groom themselves, as all cats do, the suspect protein is still on their skin, and thus in the air. If there is an advantage to a hairless cat, it is only that fewer additional allergens like pollen or dust mites can cling to the hair and also get released into the air during grooming. Cat hair or dander itself is not allergenic, so shaving the cat will not lessen the reaction.

The Big 3 Strategies for Coping with Cat Allergies

1. TREAT THE CAT

According to one clinical study, spray-on anti-allergy substances, or specially designed shampoos or cream rinses have negligible effect on allergic reactions. Immersion bathing works well temporarily, but allergens return within days. At the same time, stories abound about the above products working very well, even lowering reactions to the point of complete tolerance. It’s a matter of trial and error with each individual cat.

Bear in mind that bathing the cat every week will dry out the skin, and may actually increase protein secretions. One common sense treatment to help lower the allergen output in the house is daily brushing or combing, thus removing much of the hair and dander that may contain the allergenic protein. It also makes sense not to have the allergy sufferer do the brushing, and doing it in a room the allergic person can avoid (or outside in a confined, safe area) will ensure that no additional protein is released into the home.

Manage any pre-existing conditions the cat may have which could cause excessive scaly, dry skin and exacerbate the guardian’s problem. Bathing the cat weekly with a cat-safe, anti-allergen shampoo can be helpful, if the cat is amenable.

The oral tranquilizer **Acepromazine** can be given at ultra-low doses in the cat’s food and provides relief for a great many allergy sufferers. While a single small study on the use of Acepromazine did not find statistically significant results, in practice, about 50% of people report a complete cessation of symptoms, 25% report that symptoms are improved, and 25% report no change. It takes 2-4 weeks to see results.

However, the formula is simple, inexpensive, and easy to try. The medication changes the chemical composition of the cat’s saliva, reducing the amount of allergenic protein secreted. It must be given every day to maintain the effect. Because the dose is

so tiny, it has no effect on the cat's behavior and can be given for life.

You can give the recipe for "Ace Allergy Drops" to your vet:

- To a one-ounce dropper bottle containing 30 ml spring water, add 5 mg Acepromazine (1/2 ml of injectable 10 mg/ml, or one 5 mg tablet crushed, or half of a 10 mg tablet crushed).
- Shake well before using. For an adult cat, add 5-6 drops of mixture to cat's wet food daily. For smaller kittens, use 1-2 drops. Because there is no preservative, store the bottle in the refrigerator.

A change in the cat's diet can do wonders. In particular, the addition of **Omega-3 fatty acids** to the diet will keep the skin supple and healthy. Moreover, many people who have put their cats on homemade or raw diets report that their allergies have diminished or even vanished.

It only makes sense to avoid processed foods with all their additives and dyes. At the very least, get rid of the dry food—that's where the most questionable ingredients and stray chemicals are found. There is no value in declawing a cat due to allergies; in fact, there's no value (and much detriment) in declawing a cat for any reason.

2. MANAGE THE ENVIRONMENT

Since allergens are cumulative, using several moderately effective methods together is the best approach.

Daily vacuuming is commonly recommended, but vacuuming can backfire! Many allergy sufferers overvacuum. An ordinary vacuum cleaner's powerful motor simply stirs up and blows the tiny allergen proteins around the room along with dust and other potential allergens.

A better option is a vacuum with a microfiltration device (**like a HEPA filter**), which can actually stop something as small as feline allergens. The pesky proteins can settle not only in drapes and furniture, but also on shelving and walls – so make sure that the vacuum has an assortment of hand attachments and get into all the corners. Obviously, the allergy sufferer should never be the one vacuuming (but there's no reason why he can't do the dishes)!

When dusting, using **spray furniture polish** dramatically limits allergen particles from becoming airborne. Spray directly onto the surface, rather than onto the dustcloth; it's more effective. Judicious dusting can reduce airborne cat allergens by 95%.

Limit fabrics in the home: all porous materials are allergen friendly. Carpet accumulates 100 times more cat allergen than a hard floor. Blinds are better than drapes (although you do have to keep them clean). Use hypoallergenic pillows instead of feather ones. Anything you can do to make the environment "harder" will result in as much allergen resistance as possible. Soft surfaces in the home are invitations to catnaps as well as allergy attacks.

Specifically keeping the cat out of the bedroom will give the guardian an "**allergen free zone**," which can bring psychological as well as physiologic relief. (However, suddenly locking the cat out could trigger behavioral issues.)

An effective tool for clearing cat allergens is a **freestanding air purifier** with a HEPA filter. These filters can remove nearly 100% of the allergens from the room in which they are placed. Ideally, there should be one in every room with fabrics, but at least put one in the bedroom.

3. GUARD THE GUARDIAN

Wash those hands! Every time the guardian pets the cat, has a snuggle session, etc., immediately wash the hands with soap and warm water. This must become an iron-clad habit.

Keep up with the laundry—Resist the temptation to wear the same clothes between laundering cycles, even if they're "not that dirty" – really, they are! Washing machines are capable of removing most cat allergens. Wool and polyester clothing retain more cat allergen than cotton, although fabric in general is a haven for allergenic particles. Dry cleaning is reasonably effective at removing cat allergen from non-washable fabrics.

No No Kitty!—If the guardian suffers from a contact allergy like rashes or hives, the sad truth is that he/she must curtail any efforts from the cat to show affection by licking or giving 'love bites' – a primary source of the allergenic protein is the cat's saliva.

Consult an allergist—It is rare for someone to be allergic to only one protein. It's very possible that pre-existing allergies weren't as noticeable until the new cat became "the last straw" and triggered more violent reactions. If allergies are bad enough, keeping epinephrine handy may be necessary.

Medication—Both over the counter and prescription medication have had wonderful results for some, and done absolutely nothing for others. Don't forget to tell your physician or allergist what you are using, who can properly monitor results. Taking antihistamines or histamine blockers on a daily basis as a prophylactic for as long as one lives with a cat is a controversial subject. Diphenhydramine (**Benadryl®**) is considered very safe even long-term, but the side effects can be unpleasant. But it's good to keep around for those really bad days.

Holistic Allergy Remedies—These are legion. The most promising ones include:

- Use a Neti pot once or twice a day to keep sinuses clear; or use a plain saline nasal spray
- Omega-3 fatty acids (yes, for you, too!)
- Quercetin (a member of the Vitamin C family) and/or other antioxidants

- Stinging Nettle (a natural antihistamine)
- Butterbur (may block histamine and other inflammatory messengers)
- Homeopathy
- Acupuncture
- Nutrition (simplifying your diet, especially eliminating wheat and corn, can go a long way toward making your immune system much less reactive)
- Stress management (stress does your immune system no favors; use flower essences, exercise, meditation – but heck, you know all that stuff already!)

It may take time and some trial-and-error with different combinations of solutions to hit upon the right regimen. Convincing one's significant other may prove more difficult. But people manage to live with allergies to thousands of airborne particles every day. And aren't those big eyes and all that unconditional love worth it?

Source:

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