

Living with Dog Allergies

A dog is man's best friend — that is, unless the man is allergic to his dog.

Pet allergies are common in the United States. According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, 15 to 30 percent of all Americans are affected. Although allergies to cats are about twice as common, allergic reactions to dogs tend to be more severe. This is especially the case in those with asthma.

What causes dog allergies?

Dogs secrete proteins that end up in their dander (dead skin), saliva, and urine. An allergic reaction occurs when a sensitive person's immune system reacts abnormally to the usually harmless proteins. Different breeds produce different dander, so it's possible to be more allergic to some dogs than others.

The allergen eventually finds its way into the animal's fur. From there, it collects in carpets, on clothing, on walls, and between couch cushions. The pet hair itself is not an allergen, but the hair can hold dust and dander.

Pet dander can remain airborne for long periods of time as well. It can eventually find its way into your eyes or lungs.

Symptoms of dog allergies

The symptoms of a dog allergy may range from mild to severe. Symptoms may not appear for several days after exposure in people with low sensitivity.

Some clues you may be allergic to dogs include:

- swelling and itching in the membranes of the nose or around the eyes
- redness of the skin after being licked by a dog
- coughing, shortness of breath, or wheezing within 15 to 30 minutes of exposure to allergens
- rash on the face, neck, or chest
- a severe asthma attack (in someone with asthma)

Children with dog allergies will often develop eczema in addition to the above symptoms. Eczema is a painful inflammation of the skin.

People used to believe that exposing a newborn to the family dog could cause a child to develop a pet allergy. Thankfully for dog owners, the opposite appears to be true. Several studies in the past few years — including one published in the *Journal of the British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology* — have found that exposing a baby to a pet doesn't increase the risk of developing allergies or asthma. It may actually protect the child from developing them in the future.

How to treat dog allergies

The only surefire way to get rid of a pet allergy is to remove the pet from your home. There are, however, ways to minimize your exposure to allergens and lessen your symptoms if you don't want to part with Fluffy.

Medications

Here are some medications and treatments that can help you manage allergies and asthma:

- Antihistamines are over-the-counter (OTC) medications such as Benadryl, Claritin, Allegra, and Clarinex OTC that can help relieve itching, sneezing, and runny nose.
- Nasal corticosteroids such as Flonase (now available over the counter) or Nasonex may reduce inflammation and control symptoms.
- Cromolyn sodium is an OTC nasal spray that may help reduce symptoms, especially if it's used before they develop.
- Decongestants make it easier to breathe by shrinking swollen tissues in the nasal passage. These are available in oral form or as a nasal spray.
- Allergy shots (immunotherapy) expose you to the animal protein (allergen) that's causing the reaction and help your body become less sensitive, reducing symptoms. Shots are given by an allergist and are often used in more severe cases for long-term treatment.
- Leukotriene modifiers, such as the prescription tablet montelukast (Singulair), may be recommended if you can't tolerate nasal antihistamines or corticosteroids.

Natural remedies

Some people with dog allergies may find that a saline (salt water) rinse daily to clear nasal passages of allergens can help. A "nasal lavage" can control symptoms such as congestion and postnasal drip.

OTC saline sprays and nasal lavage kits are readily available. You can also make your own by mixing 1/8 teaspoon of table salt with distilled water.

Lifestyle changes

There are several things dog owners can do around the home to reduce allergens. They include:

- setting up dog-free zones (certain rooms, such as a bedroom, where the dog is not allowed)
- bathing the dog weekly using a pet-friendly shampoo (done by a non-allergic person)
- removing carpeting, upholstered furniture, horizontal blinds, curtains, and any other items that may attract dander
- using high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) purifiers to reduce airborne allergens in the home
- keeping the dog outside (only in certain climates in a well-contained area and under humane conditions)
- looking into hypoallergenic dog breeds
- using a trial period when introducing a new pet to the family to assess family members' reactions to the new dog

The takeaway

Many of the lifestyle changes and allergy medications listed above can help you to reduce uncomfortable symptoms if you love dogs and don't want to give up being around them.

An allergist can perform tests and tell you how severe your dog allergy is and what types of treatments can help. Talk to your doctor about your allergy and your treatment options.

Sources:

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