cat protection society OF NSW

FACTSHEET

Living with cat allergies

Sadly, many cats are surrendered due to people being allergic to the cat. This doesn't have to be the case. Most cat allergies can be very effectively treated, letting you and your cat live happily together.

What causes allergies to cats?
Allergy causing substances, or allergens, can be found everywhere in our environment. Some people are allergic to the fur, urine, fæces, or saliva of the cat, others have an allergic reaction to the skin cells, or dander of the cat; while some are allergic to the oils produced on the skin of the cat.

Interestingly, the American Veterinary Board found in a recent study that more people are allergic to an allergen from their dog than their cat, but as more dogs live outdoors than do cats, people assume they are allergic to the cat.

Allergy symptoms
Just as every person may be allergic to a different allergen, the symptoms of this reaction may also differ greatly. Some people may have very mild reactions, others very severe. Some of the more common symptoms are:

- Sneezing
- Runny or blocked nose
- Itchy, watery eyes
- Coughing or wheezing
- Itchy skin
- Redness and inflammation of skin
- Asthma
- Eczema

People with asthma or eczema may find their symptoms become more severe. If you notice any of these reactions, you should see your doctor.

Treatment
Once your doctor has tested and confirmed you have an allergy to your cat, there are several different medications they may prescribe depending on the type of allergy and the severity of the symptoms. There are many new medications available that may manage your symptoms effectively. Nasal sprays, antihistamine tablets, decongestants, inhalers, and even some herbal remedies are all commonly available.

In severe cases, an immunotherapy course of injections might be recommended to help desensitise you to the allergen. It is also important to minimise the amount of allergens in your home to successfully treat the allergic reaction. Many people are treated daily for cat allergies and continue to live happily with one or many cats. Many people stop having an allergic reaction to their own cat, even though they are still allergic to other cats.

Reducing the risk of allergens in your home
You need to ensure it is your cat that you are having an allergic reaction to. Other irritants, like tobacco smoke, dust mites, or pollen, might be causing or adding to your allergic reactions. Decreasing allergens in your home can help, even if you are allergic to your cat. Some steps to minimise the risk of reactions are:

- Vacuum daily; this will reduce the amount of hair and skin cells in the environment
- Groom your cat in a well-ventilated area or outside. Regular grooming will minimise the amount of loose hair in the house. You can also wipe the cat down with a warm damp cloth to collect any loose fur or skin cells
- Use a lint roller on your cat's bedding regularly
- Wash all cushions and throw blankets regularly, as these will collect dander and hair. There are specially formulated detergents to minimise allergens
- Designate 'cat free' zones, such as the bedroom
- Install an outdoor enclosure for your cat to play. This will keep your cat safe and minimise the dander and hair in the home
- Try to avoid carpeted areas. If possible, have wood or vinyl flooring
- Install HEPA filters in your air conditioning and vacuum. These filters collect small particles that normal filters will not. Remember to clean the filters regularly to ensure maximum effectiveness
- Always wash your hands after playing with your pet
- Avoid dusty types of cat litter, as these can often also be an allergen
- See your vet about your cat's diet. Often changing the diet to one containing omega 3 fatty acids can reduce allergens
- Check with your doctor about your diet. Some people have allergies or sensitivities to foods that can make the cat allergy more severe
- Be thorough in your cleaning routine
- Keep the house well-ventilated to maintain a constant airflow
- Desex your cat. Doctors have found that people are less allergic to desexed cats
- Don't avoid the cat totally. Some people find that repeated exposure to the same cat/cats over time stops their allergic reactions. Most children who have an allergic reaction to cats will desensitise themselves to the allergen with constant exposure and will not have allergies when older.

Keeping your cat
Once you have established with your doctor that your cat is definitely the cause of your allergic reactions you can still keep your cat. Giving up your cat will be very stressful and upsetting for the cat and for you. As well as treatments, there are steps you can take around the home to reduce the allergen load and these strategies should be tried before considering giving up your cat. As stated earlier, many people will actually stop being allergic to their own cat, even if they are still allergic to other cats.

If you have a lot of allergies, or if you don't know whether you are allergic to cats, you should think carefully before adopting a cat. It might be helpful for you to foster a cat first, or pet-sit for some friends, to try to find out whether you are allergic.

While all care has been taken in preparing this document, it is intended to provide general information only and should not be taken as constituting professional advice. Mention of a product or business does not mean endorsement by Cat Protection.

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