

pets and allergy



Exposure to pets at home or work can trigger allergic reactions including asthma in some people. Pet allergens come from:

- Cats
- Dogs
- Guinea pigs
- Horses
- Rabbits
- Mice and rats
- Birds

Allergens are found in pet saliva, hair, urine and dander (dead skin flakes). These allergens are carried in the air on very small particles which you cannot see.

Symptoms may occur within minutes of being exposed to the pet or they may build up over several hours. For some people, this may be life threatening.

If a pet comes inside, its sheddings become part of the house dust and are present even when the animal is outside. In this circumstance, it may be difficult to recognise that you are allergic to the animal.

Cats and dogs

Cats and dogs are a major source of allergy in the home. The allergens come from both the sweat and salivary glands. Since all cats and dogs have sweat and salivary glands, all breeds contain allergens, although the amount of allergen varies between breeds.

Allergens are stuck to the fur and skin of pets and become airborne when they shed their fur. The allergens can remain airborne for some time.

Cat allergen is especially difficult to remove from houses. It can remain in the house for months after the cat is removed. Cat allergen can be found in places where cats have never lived. For example, it can be carried around on clothing to schools and offices.

Guinea pigs, mice, rats, rabbits and birds

Guinea pigs, mice, rats, rabbits and birds are more easily kept outside, but can still cause annoying and occasionally serious problems.

Horses

Horse allergy is very serious. Horse hair on clothes can be sufficient to trigger asthma. Great care must be taken to shower and change clothes before returning to a home of a person allergic to horses.

Managing pet allergy

So, what do you do when your pet causes you to cough and wheeze or sneeze?

The ideal solution is to responsibly remove the pet from the home and, wherever possible, avoid contact with other pets or the homes they inhabit.

Although keeping a pet is discouraged if asthma is triggered by it, there are ways to minimise your exposure to its allergens.

1. Have the pet live outside the house. Providing them with a kennel or hutch will help to make them comfortable and safe. Birds should be kept in an outside aviary away from the house. If you need to exclude the pet from the house, don't forget it is still part of the family.
2. If the pet does happen to wander inside, ensure it is kept out of the bedroom. Many hours are spent in this room sleeping, and keeping the pet out will reduce your exposure significantly. Try to keep the pet out of any other rooms in which you spend a great deal of time such as the living room. Remember, any visit from your pet will leave allergens behind that may take weeks to months to remove.
3. Vacuum carpets weekly. For best results use a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Air) filter.
4. Ask a non-allergic friend or family member to wash and brush your pet outside. This will remove any loose hair and allergens from your pet, reducing the amount shed indoors. Litter boxes, cages and kennels should be cleaned out regularly. Again, this is a task for a non-allergic person. Urine is another source of allergens in pets such as rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs, rats and mice.

5. Washing the cat or dog weekly will significantly reduce the amount of allergen that is released into the environment. Consult your veterinarian for advice regarding the pet's skin care to prevent excessive dryness due to frequent washing.
6. Allergens accumulate in areas such as carpets, mattresses, cushions and on vertical and horizontal surfaces. The allergen particle is so small, that it can pass through fabrics, so it is suggested that mattresses and cushions be covered with specific protectors to prevent the containment and release of allergens.
7. The benefits of air filter systems are unclear. If you wish to purchase an air purifier, buy one that contains a HEPA filter.

If you suspect pet allergy

If you suspect an allergy to pets, see a doctor. Allergy tests may identify the allergy. Spend time with someone else's animals and assess the physical reaction. It is better to do this before falling in love with a new pet whose removal may cause distress.

Some people with pet allergy such as vets with occupational pet allergy may benefit from desensitising injections given by an allergist. However, desensitisation is not suitable for everyone.

For more information contact the Breathe Better Health Line 1800 645 130, go to www.asthmasa.org.au or visit the Breathe Better Centre at 300 South Road Hilton.