

EAR, NOSE THROAT AND ALLERGY CENTER
1715 N. Lynn Riggs Blvd., Claremore, OK 74017
(918)341-5088
Mark Welch, D.O., F.A.O.C.O.

PET ALLERGIES: WHEN YOU CAN'T DODGE THE DANDER

What can you do when your dog or cat is causing your allergy symptoms? Parting with your pet is an option...but there are other solutions.

You've dreamed of owning a pet for as long as you can remember. However, once this pet has been introduced into the family one can sometimes have allergy symptoms that were never there before. These include itchy watery eyes and a stuffy nose...to name a few. The most effective way to alleviate the signs and symptoms that come with a pet allergy is to find a new home for your pet, but separating from this loyal companion can be heartbreaking.

If your allergy is serious enough that it threatens your health and well-being....for instance, you require emergency medication for asthma attacks....you may have no choice but to part with your pet. But if your allergy is mild, you might have other options. Only you and your doctor can determine the best solutions for you and your pet. But learning more about your allergy can help you know what you can do to control the symptoms.

How pets cause allergy symptoms:

Any animal with fur or feathers can contribute to your allergy symptoms. Coming in close contact with an animal that you are sensitive to can cause allergy symptoms. You might be amount the thousands of people allergic to cats. But it might surprise you that symptoms don't come from exposure to cat hair. Rather, cat dander, including flaky skin cells and dried saliva, is what triggers an allergic reaction. Dogs also have dander that can trigger allergies, though this is not as common a problem as it is with cats. Dried pet saliva can stick to carpets, bedding, furniture and clothing.

The tiny dander particles on your pet are very sticky. They will stick to you, your clothes and the carpets and furnishings in your home. Dander can be carried through the air and into your eyes and nose. There it becomes an irritant and causes your allergy signs and symptoms, such as a runny nose, watery eyes and hives or whelps, to name a few. No dog or cat is hypoallergenic or without dander, though it is possible to be more sensitive to some breeds than to others. In cats, males tend to have more dander than do females, but not enough to make a difference in your allergy symptoms. It is safe to assume that once you have been diagnosed with a cat or dog allergy, you are allergic to all cats and/or dogs.

Eliminating Pet Dander:

Unfortunately, making your house dander-free usually means parting with your pet. And your doctor may recommend that your house be pet free. Giving up your cat or dog is the only way to permanently reduce the amount of dander in your home. And, as if the separation isn't hard enough, you'll next face a monumental cleaning task. Removing your pet from your house won't make your allergies go away instantly. It can take several weeks to several months for the dander in your house to dwindle to the point that it no longer causes your symptoms. Thorough cleaning, from scrubbing your walls to replacing your furniture or carpet,

will remove dander much more quickly. Carpet cleaning only temporarily removes the dander. If your pet is still in the house, you will get dander in your carpets once again.

Ways to control the animal allergens in your home:

- **Creating a pet-free zone** - Section off a portion of your home to be pet free. For many people, this might be a bedroom. Don't let your pet in – no matter how many times the animal meows or barks at the door. Though you can't stop the dander from sticking to you and finding its way into your bedroom, keeping your cat or dog out will reduce the levels of allergens in that one room.
- **Using special bedding** - Allergen-resisting bedding makes it easier to keep pet dander from settling on your bed.
- **Washing your pet frequently** – Bathing your pet on a weekly basis can reduce the amount of dander in your pet's fur. Even cats eventually get used to baths. Ask your veterinarian about the best way to bathe your pet without causing too much stress to the animal.
- **Removing dander-attracting furnishings** – Replace carpets with linoleum or hardwood floors. Exchange your fabric furniture for vinyl or leather. Take down your cloth drapes and put up plastic blinds instead. These new furnishings won't attract and hold pet dander.
- **Using HEPA air and vacuum filters**- High-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters for your air ducts can trap allergens in the air. HEPA vacuum bags will reduce the amount of dander rustled up by your cleaning.

There is no guarantee these other options will work. Be realistic about how much annoyance from your allergy symptoms you are willing to accept. If you find your allergies are not getting better, or if they are getting worse, you might have to face the fact that your symptoms will not improve unless no contact with the animal is permanent.

Putting Your Pet Outside:

You might consider putting your pet outdoors as a way to reduce the allergens in your home. But if you still plan to pet and play with your pet while it is outside, that sticky dander can easily stick to your clothes and be carried back into your home. If you have severe allergies, even limited exposure to your pet can cause problems. But if your allergies are mild, putting your pet outside might reduce the dander in your home to a level that doesn't cause your symptoms to flare up.

Remember that leaving your pet outside in extreme heat or cold can be dangerous for the animal. Depending on where you live, putting your dog or cat outside might not be the best option. It may be impossible to completely eliminate animal allergens in your home even if you put your pet outside. Animal allergens remain present even when there are no pets in the home. It is most likely brought into your house on your clothing. For example, children who play with other children who have cats can definitely bring dander into the home on their clothes.

If you CAN'T part with your pet, what can you do?

Many people with allergies choose to keep their pets, despite what their doctors recommend. You might want to keep your cat or dog around at all costs, no matter how bad your symptoms become. If your allergy is severe, keeping your pet could lead to other problems, such as asthma. Talk to your doctor about the severity of your allergy symptoms.

Tell your doctor about your decision **not** to part with your pet. It may be helpful to have allergy testing to determine if your animal is the cause of your symptoms. If it is, immunotherapy may decrease your symptoms and make living with your pet more tolerable. Also, reducing the levels of dust and mold in your house might be all you need to control your symptoms. Medications, such as antihistamines and nose sprays, can control your pet allergy symptoms. Some medications should be taken daily and others as needed. Again, determine a plan of action with your health care provider.