

Managing Allergies and Pets



Millions of people struggle with allergic reactions to cats and dogs. Unfortunately, some people feel that once they are diagnosed with a pet allergy, they have no choice but to remove their pets from their home. But many people have found ways to minimize and manage their allergy symptoms – allowing them to keep their pets as beloved members of the family.

What causes an allergic reaction?

People with pet allergies are sensitive to a specific protein that is found in a pet's dander. This protein can also be found in the pet's saliva or urine, so they may even have an allergic reaction with breeds that are often referred to as "hypoallergenic" or "non-shedding." Symptoms of an allergic reaction will vary from one person to the next. Some may experience mild sniffing, sneezing, coughing, irritated eyes, or itching. Some may experience more severe issues such as skin hives, wheezing or difficulty breathing. If your symptoms are severe, consult with a doctor immediately.

What should you do if you think you're allergic to your pet?

Many people are truly allergic to cats or dogs (or both). However, others may simply be allergic to something on their pet - like grass pollen that is brought in on their dog's haircoat after being outside, a topical flea preventative they put on their pet, or a shampoo they used to bathe a pet, etc. If you think you might be allergic to your pet you should visit an Allergist. If an allergy test confirms that you are allergic to your cat or dog, you may be able to minimize your symptoms to a manageable level, depending on the severity of your allergies. This will often require a combination of different strategies, diligent follow-through, and patience while you figure out what works best for you.

So, what can you do to manage your allergy symptoms?

1. **Create an "allergy-free" area** – You may see great improvement simply by making your bedroom a no-pet zone. This sanctuary space allows you to get a break from the allergens in other areas of your home. You can train your pets not to enter this room, but you can also utilize closed doors, baby-gates, or other barriers to prevent access. Use mattress and pillow covers designed to be less permeable to allergens. You might also consider training your pet to stay off of furniture in other areas of your home, and offer options of comfy pet beds.
2. **Clean often** – Regularly dusting, vacuuming and mopping will significantly reduce the accumulation of all allergens in your home. Regularly wash your bedding, along with any fabric surfaces the pet comes in to contact with. Consider switching to hard surface flooring if possible – carpets and rugs will collect more dust and allergens.
3. **Brush your pet regularly** – Using a brush that is designed to remove the pet's undercoat can help remove the hair and dander before it is shed in your home. Brushing can release allergens into the air, so you might take steps to minimize an allergic reaction by brushing your pet outside of the home, and wearing protective gear such as gloves and a face mask. Brushing could also be done by someone in the home without allergies.
4. **Bathe your pet often** – Bathing your pet in any pet-safe shampoo will remove allergens from their coat and wash them down the drain. If your pet is not amenable to regular bathing you might also find some success in regularly wiping them down with a wet microfiber cloth. Wiping their coat may also help to remove common outdoor allergens, like pollen, that they can bring in from outdoors.
5. **Wash your hands frequently** – Wash your hands immediately after petting or handling your cat or dog, and avoid touching your face, mouth, nose and eyes.
6. **Consider using air filters in your home** – HEPA filters can help to remove tiny airborne allergens such as dust mites, pollen, and pet dander. These are most effective when used in individual rooms, so you might consider one unit for your "allergy-free" room, and separate units for other rooms in your home. Remember to change the filters as often as instructed.
7. **Determine if anti-histamines are needed** – There are many antihistamines that can be obtained without a prescription. These OTC (over the counter) medications come in many different types, formulas, and brands. It may take trial and error before you can determine which one best manages your symptoms.

What if those steps don't work?

If you have diligently tried to manage your allergies with the steps listed above, but you're still suffering from allergy symptoms, then it may be time to consult a doctor. They may be able to prescribe a more effective allergy medication.

You may also consider visiting an Immunologist. Immunotherapy can help pet allergy sufferers by developing protective antibodies through "allergy shots." These allergy shots are regular injections given over a period of time to stop or reduce allergy attacks. Each allergy shot contains a tiny amount of the specific substance(s) that cause your allergy symptoms. The shots contain just enough of this allergen to stimulate your immune system. Over time, your doctor increases the dose of allergens in each of your allergy shots. Your immune system builds up a tolerance to the allergens, desensitizing your body to them and decreasing your symptoms. Allergy shots require patience, as it may take years of periodic booster shots before building this protection.