

## Arf. Meow. Aaahh-choo!

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor  
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### You can manage allergies while living with your pets



Ill my life, I've powered through allergies. Dust, pollen, grass, cleaning chemicals, air fresheners, and cigarette smoke cause me to itch, get congested, sneeze, and have asthmatic reactions. Sometimes over-the-counter medications help reduce symptoms, and I've learned to avoid situations that could make me sick. But one allergy in particular has been hard to avoid: my allergy to dogs and cats.

Several years ago, my primary care physician decided to do an allergy blood test on me. When the results came in, she sat me down, looked me in the eye, and said, "Janet, I've never seen such off-the-chart numbers for reactions to dog and cat allergens."

Great. I'm a medical freak, and I live with two dogs and several cats. My occupation? Dog trainer.

I'm not alone. According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA), 30 percent of people with allergies are allergic to dogs and cats. Cat allergies are nearly twice as prevalent as allergies to dogs. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) estimates that 15-20 percent of the U.S. population has animal allergies.

The Mayo Clinic explains a pet allergy as the immune system's over-reaction to animal urine, saliva, sweat, or skin cell (dander) proteins. The body produces antibody proteins that think the allergen is dangerous. These antibodies are meant to protect us by inflaming tissue in the sinuses, lungs, or skin. The results are sneezing, runny nose, cough, itchy eyes, eczema, hives, scratchy throat, wheezing, and difficulty breathing.

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Dander can linger in the air for hours. Along with pet saliva, dander sticks to clothing, walls, furniture, bedding, and carpets, and retains its strength for months. The AAFA points out that pet hair is not an allergen, and that although some cats and dogs may shed less than others, the existence of hypoallergenic breeds is a myth.

In the report “Dog Allergen and Cat Allergen in U.S. Homes,” published in 2004 by the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, it was found that dog and cat allergens are so transportable and sticky that they are universally detectable in U.S. homes, even in households that don’t have a dog or cat.

Clinical diagnosis of a pet allergy can be done three ways: through a physical examination of the nasal passages, an allergy skin test, or a blood test. During a skin test, a minute amount of a pet allergen extract is administered by a health professional in the skin through a needle stick. Skin reactions will occur within a few minutes. A blood screening tests for antibody proteins caused by certain pet allergens.

There are many ways of treating allergy symptoms. With a doctor’s direction, you can medically treat symptoms with a variety of drugs. Decongestants reduce inflammation in the nasal passages. Antihistamines and leukotriene modifiers lessen or block a chemical produced in the body during an allergic reaction. Corticosteroids in nasal spray form reduce inflammation and sneezing.

With the help of an allergist, a series of shots can alter the immune system’s reactions to allergens. Weekly immunotherapy is done over a six-month period, followed by monthly shots over several years.

Saline nasal irrigation is an old home remedy using a neti pot to flush out allergens from the sinuses. But no matter your course of preferred treatment, making changes at home is paramount to living with pet allergies.

Cleaning is important. Wear a mask while using a vacuum with an HEPA allergy filter. Wash walls and furniture, dust, and steam-clean your carpets. Allergists recommend replacement of

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bedroom carpets and bedding, as cleaning is not 100 percent effective. Choose washable blinds, instead of curtains. Cover the mattress and box spring with allergy-resistant covers. Run an air purifier to reduce allergens. Change clothes and wash your hands after being around an animal.

Keep pets out of the bedroom, and bathe them often. Half your life is spent in the bedroom, so keep it dander-free. A tile floor or other non-carpet flooring is ideal where you sleep. Turn off ceiling fans, which stir up allergens.

Use scent-free and low-dust pellet cat litter made from wood, walnuts, corn, or grass, rather than clay. Brush your pets outdoors.

What works well for me is turning off the ceiling fans at home and washing my hands after any contact with a dog or cat. I've become conscious of not touching my face or rubbing my eyes, as well. What has never been an option for me? Giving up my livelihood or my pets. This is something about which animal welfare groups like the ASPCA and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) are concerned, as thousands of pets are surrendered to shelters each year because of allergies.

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