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Living with Cats for Allergy and Asthma Sufferers

Note: Nothing in this document should be substituted for the medical advice and personal care of your physician or pulmonologist. Asthma is a serious and potentially life-threatening condition. Please implement these suggestions only under the supervision of a qualified medical professional. When selecting a doctor, choose one who will be sensitive to your feelings and do everything possible, within reason, to help you keep your pet. Surrendering your cat should be a last resort not a first choice.

According to the National Council on Pet Population Study & Policy, “allergies” is the second most popular reason for relinquishing a cat. However, in many cases, it is possible to manage allergies so that owners can keep their cats.

Identifying the Source of the Allergy

The first step in managing allergies is identifying the source of the allergy. The clearest way to answer the question “Am I allergic to my cat?” is to have an allergy test performed by a qualified medical professional. General practitioners can order a simple blood test and allergists or ear/nose/throat doctors can perform more in-depth testing. These tests will tell you whether you are allergic to your cat or to other popular allergens. Dust, mold, pollen, mildew, and other environmental allergies are often mistaken for cat allergies; it is important to correctly identify triggers so that they may be accurately treated or avoided.

Managing Your Triggers

Dust Mites

Your cat chased a toy into a dusty place, such as under your bed. You subsequently pet your cat and have an allergy flare-up. Rather than cat dander, dust may have triggered the allergic response. To keep dust to a minimum:

- Use air purifiers throughout the house; look for the ones with HEPA filters. Salt lamps can help attract dust and cause it to drop to the floor where it can be vacuumed up. Some purifiers use UV light to kill germs/viruses, as well, which may be an attractive option. Do not neglect your air ducts and furnace—have your furnace regularly serviced, change the filter as often as directed, as frequently as monthly, and have your air ducts professionally cleaned every six to 12 months.

- Get a dust mite cover for your mattresses pillows. Use only hypoallergenic pillows and blankets (synthetic, down alternatives work well; no feathers or down). Wash bedding weekly, paying particular attention to pet beds and areas your pet likes to sleep. Use slipcovers on furniture that can be removed and washed.
- Use sprays to kill dust mites and neutralize allergens. Bissell, Febreze, and Nature's Miracle are among the companies that produce commercial sprays that kill dust mites and/or neutralize allergens. Use them in conjunction with a vigorous cleaning schedule that includes frequent vacuuming and laundering.
- If possible, replace carpeting with hard wood, tile, or linoleum floor; carpeting can trap dust and other allergens.

Litter

Many people with allergies believe they are allergic to cats, when they are actually allergic to cat litter. Many cat litters are made of clay; clay substrate produces a lot of dust, which can act as an irritant to both human and cat, and attract dust mites. Dust mites are a major allergen.

Fragrances are also another popular allergen and frequently found in commercial cat litters. Avoiding scented litters will cut down on allergens; additionally, many cats are irritated by strong smells, so using unscented litter will reduce stress on your cat.

Scoopable cat litter may be especially triggering because of the fine dust particles and chemicals used. According to Franny Syufy, clay "clumping" cat litters sometimes contain sodium bentonite, The sodium bentonite swells when liquid is added; when ingested or inhaled, it can cause irritation to the lungs.

One way to help reduce allergies related to litter is to change your cat litter to "hypoallergenic" varieties. Crystal/pearl cat litter is one alternative; the granules are not fine, producing much less dust. You may also try Purina's Yesterdays News cat litter (<http://www.yesterdaysnews.com/>). It is made from recycled newspapers and is dust free. Other alternatives include Feline Pine (<http://www.felinepine.com/>), which is made from pinewood, and World's Best Cat Litter (<http://www.worldsbestcatlitter.com/>), which is made from whole-kernel corn.

When changing cat litter, be sure to do so slowly, mixing some of the old litter with the new litter to help acclimate your cat to the new feel under his feet. If your cats initially dislike the crystals/pearls, you can try using Precious Cat Long Haired Litter, which contains additives to attract the cats to the litter box, or you can add Precious Cat Ultra Litter Attractant to your existing crystal/pearl cat litter (<http://www.preciouscat.com/ourproducts-c-1.html>). Remember to bathe your cats or wipe them with fragrance-free baby wipes or allergy wipes so that the old litter dust is removed from the fur.

Other good litter box habits:

- Clean litter boxes frequently, scooping at least once a day and changing out all litter on a weekly basis (allergens are found in urine and feces).
- Place the litter box in a well-ventilated area, especially areas like a laundry, garage, or bathroom that have vents to the outside.
- Do not put litter boxes in well-trafficked areas or near air ducts, so that allergens do not circulate in the air and so allergy sufferers come into the least amount of contact with the potential allergens.
- If possible, have someone other than the allergy-sufferer scoop or empty the box. If no one else is available, using a mask and gloves can help reduce allergic reactions.

Other Triggers

Avoid chemicals, where possible. Alternatives to try:

- Use organic dry cleaning methods.
- Use fragrance-and dye-free detergents and soaps. Avoid scented candles, essential oils, perfume, scented cleaning products, after-shave, cologne, and air freshener sprays or plug-ins.
- Don't use chemical pesticides or herbicides; try natural alternatives.
- Use natural cleaning products, such as vinegar, lemon, borax, salt, and baking soda. Never use bleach to clean a litter box, use mild detergent and warm water.
- Use low-or no-VOC paints.
- If you must use chemicals such as bleach or ammonia, wear a mask with a respirator and gloves.
- Use a good HEPA filter vacuum and wear a mask when you use it. Vacuum often. Don't sweep, as sweeping kicks up dust into the air.
- Use wipes, a damp washcloth, or a bucket of warm soapy water to clean dusty surfaces and knick-knacks. Wear a mask when handling dusty items.
- Wear a mask and gardening gloves when you garden or do yard work, and especially when working on home improvements. Be particularly cautious around high-fragrance or high-pollen flowers and trees. Keep flowers outside

- Avoid mold and mildew. Use warm, soapy water or a commercial mildew/mold cleanser to remove mold. Wear gloves and a mask during cleaning and throw away sponges or cloths when done. Large mold problems or severe allergies may require the assistance of a professional mold removal company. To prevent future breakouts of mold or mildew, keep areas clean and dry. Use exhaust fans in areas that are prone to damp, such as bathrooms. Address chronic mold problems with a professional. Do not use Ozone generators.
- Keep windows open slightly for a half hour a day in rooms you use and all rooms if possible. Run ceiling fans. Circulating air can help reduce indoor allergens. Keep windows closed during high-pollen or pollution days.

Cat Allergen, Fel-d1

If you have a true cat allergy, these suggestions can help reduce cat-related allergens in your home.

- Use Allerpet (<http://www.allerpet.com>) topical liquid on your pet as directed. It neutralizes allergens.
- Take time to acclimate to your pet. Many people, particularly those with mild allergies, get used to the dander produced by their own pet and stop reacting after a week or two. Reducing or neutralizing dander in the air, on your pet, and on surfaces, in conjunction with an OTC allergy medication, may provide sufficient relief for many allergy sufferers.
- Cover furniture with washable throws or slipcovers, choose wooden or metal furniture, and/or choose pet-friendly fabrics such as microfiber, leather, or vinyl. Keep cat beds and cat furniture covered with throws and towels or choose washable beds; wash frequently.
- Always wash your hands after handling your pet. Create pet-free zones in your home, especially in sleeping areas. Create comfortable spaces for your cat to enjoy that do not involve sharing your spaces, such as your bed or pillow.
- Wash cat toys, collars, combs, brushes, and dishes regularly in hot soapy water.
- Replace fabric window treatments with wood, metal, or vinyl blinds or shades. Consider shades that sit between two panes of glass; they require no dusting.
- Sometimes people are allergic to specific cats. Each individual cat is slightly different and some people respond to particular cats or cat breeds more strongly than others. There is no such thing as a truly hypoallergenic pet, but addressing environmental triggers and reducing and neutralizing allergens, in conjunction with an appropriate treatment plan from their doctor, may help allergy sufferers coexist happily with the cat of their choice.

Medication

Consult with your general practitioner, ENT, or allergist regarding OTC and prescription options for managing allergies and asthma. Treatments include antihistamines, corticosteroids, steroids, short-and long-acting Beta agonists, Leukotriene modifiers, bronchodilators, immunomodulators, NSAIDs, and combination medications.

You may try ingesting 1-2 tablespoons of raw, unfiltered, local (made within 100 miles) honey on a daily basis. It reportedly can help your body build immunity to local pollens.

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Other Links

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<http://www.felinepine.com>

<http://www.worldsbestcatlitter.com>

<http://www.preciouscat.com/our-products-c-1.html>

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