Allergy to Cats

This was, in part, originally written as a pamphlet for a shelter in our area that was regularly presented with unwanted cats due to "allergies". Doctors were significantly over-diagnosing cat-allergy, leading to many being unnecessarily relinquished. This information packet is geared to clear up myths, offer practical tips and give those who actually are allergic to cats a pragmatic approach to being able to keep their family member.

Houston shelters kill more animals than any city in the U. S. but one. The outcome is grim for any animal in a kill shelter here. While there are wonderful no kill programs, they often have waiting lists. Moreover, they try to cater to those in danger, outdoors, hit by cars, abused and neglected. It helps the entire system work to save more animals if people will take the time to have allergies correctly diagnosed and if present, take some common sense steps to manage them and work to keep their pet. This could mean just a few changes in your life as an animal guardian, but it will likely mean life or death for your companion. What are you willing to do or learn to save your animal?

There are many websites specifically about living and coping with cat-allergy. A simple search will give you many additional tips.

Cats can carry allergens (substances which can trigger an allergic reaction) that can cause:

- hay fever-like symptoms
- sneezing
- watery eyes
- asthma

This leaflet deals with the most common type of allergy: red, itchy eyes, runny nose, sneezing and breathing problems. In 2003, a report came out suggesting that dogs, not cats, were more likely to cause allergies in humans. If you have both, do not be so sure to whom you are allergic, but the tips below will help with either.
If the only option is to rehome your cat, please remember that no kill programs often have long waiting lists and might not be able to take them immediately. Because so many cats are unwanted for very trivial reasons, some organizations may require a doctor certificate as proof of your allergy. Doctors that are anti-pet or anti-cat are more likely to say, "get rid of the cat", though the real cause may later prove to be house-mites, pollen or chemicals in the environment. By then, it will be too late to retrieve your cat from a shelter or its new home. Or worse, they may have been destroyed.

WHAT CAUSES CAT-ALLERGY?

Older books on cats usually blame the allergy on fur. Some specifically hold the guard hairs (the long hairs in the coat) responsible and may recommend keeping a breed that lacks these (e.g. Devon/Cornish Rex or the hairless Sphynx). Referring to these types of cats as hypoallergenic or allergen-free is incorrect as it is not the fur that causes the allergic reaction.

The real culprit appears to be cat saliva, which contains an allergen protein called Fel d 1. When a cat washes itself, saliva is deposited on its fur (or skin in the case of hairless cats). This dries into dust (dander or dandruff) that is released when a cat scratches or moves, and when humans stroke or brush a cat. An allergy occurs when the body over-reacts to Fel d 1 and produces excessive amounts of histamine. This leads to the irritating symptoms associated with cat-allergy – red, itchy eyes, runny nose, sneezing and breathing problems. Although Fel d 1 is the allergen protein most often associated with cat-allergy, humans are variable and some can develop allergies to other feline proteins, sometimes specific to certain breeds.

In general, it is not cat fur that causes the allergy; it is the dust on the hair and skin. All cats produce this, though some less than others. No cats are allergen-free, not even hairless ones.

IS THE CAT TO BLAME?

People are quick to blame an allergy on cats even if they have not suffered previously. Doctors also find them to be a convenient scapegoat. Many rehome or euthanize their cat, only to find they are really allergic to something else.

To avoid unnecessary guilt, be certain the cat is the source of the allergen. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it an allergy? Colds and infections can cause similar symptoms.
- Ask your doctor to do a skin test and confirm that the cat is to blame. They may be completely innocent!
- Does the allergy go away when you are in a cat-free environment?
• Is the allergy seasonal? Could it be caused by environmental factors such as a certain types of pollen? Do symptoms only occur during the cat's seasonal molts?

• If the cat is boarded for two weeks, are symptoms reduced? This is only a rough indication since it can take two or three months to get rid of residual allergens in the house (e.g. dust in carpets and furnishings).

In a British survey in the 1990s, 100 asthma sufferers were questioned. Only 10 thought their condition was animal related, and only 4 thought it was cat-allergy.

CAN I REDUCE THE ALLERGIC REACTION WITHOUT REHOMING THE CAT?

Many owners tolerate mild cat-allergy. Those whose symptoms worsen during seasonal molts find that antihistamine tablets, nasal sprays or homeopathic remedies can help during these times. There are additional measures that can help:

• Inquire about desensitizing injections. Not all doctors offer this treatment.

• Try a spray that can be applied to the cat’s fur to neutralize or reduce allergens.

• Wear a pollen filter mask whenever you groom the cat or indulge in long cuddles. Grooming is best done in a well-ventilated area so the dust dissipates.

• Restrict the cat’s access to certain rooms, such as the bedroom.

• Invest in a good air filter unit. These are not cheap, but they extract particles that pass through most vacuum cleaners.

• If the cat lives indoors only, bathe it in distilled water every month to wash away dried saliva dust. Tap water will leave residue.
Coping with Cat Allergies

Here is an old joke among allergists. Tell a patient to get rid of the cat and the patient will get rid of the doctor instead. There is an even older joke among shelter workers. If everyone who abandons their pet at the shelter were telling the truth, 90% of the population would be allergic to cats.

Where is the truth? The truth is that only a relatively small segment of the population, somewhere in the neighborhood of 2%, are truly allergic to cats. More importantly, for most people, there is not much merit in giving the cat away. New studies show that if a child tests positive to house-mites and pollen, but not to cat dander, getting rid of the cat may lead to them to develop a cat-allergy. In fact, one study showed that kids with a pet in the house have less asthma, and that two pets are more protective than one! As one commentator noted, it is all part of the “dirt is good for you” theory. Exposing children to allergens will help the body build up immunity to them, much the same way as vaccinations.

The first rule of thumb is not to self-diagnose. There are likely many reasons why an allergy is present and the cat may not be one of the culprits. Only an allergist can determine causes and prescribe allergy medications that make a world of difference.

If you are truly allergic to cats and living without your pet is worse than sneezing, there is a lot you can do to manage symptoms:

1. Tear out the carpet because it harbors approximately 100 times more allergens than bare floors.
2. Use a HEPA air filter in rooms where your cat spends time.
3. Do not allow the cat in the bedroom.
4. Wash the cat’s bedding and your own regularly in hot water.

Is there more you can do? Absolutely, although in many cases it may not be necessary:

1. Let the sunshine and fresh air in by opening windows.
2. Put window fans on exhaust.
3. Brush the cat outside so dander flies away.
4. Take medication.
5. Get allergy shots.
6. Replace upholstery with vinyl to keep allergens from accumulating.

First and foremost, DO NOT RUSH OUT AND GET RID OF THE FAMILY PET.
Top 10 Ways to Decrease Your Allergies to Cats!

Allergic to Cats? Keep the cat but reduce allergy symptoms.

Although cat-allergy symptoms may never go away completely, they are manageable. Remember, allergens need to be airborne and inhaled for you to have a reaction. They are also very small, thus remain suspended in the air longer.

1. **No more cats sleeping on the bed.**
   Sorry, this is a small price to pay for allergy relief. If you get your symptoms under control, by all means invite them back, but give yourself a break in the meantime.

2. **Keep them out of the bedroom altogether.**
   Close the bedroom door. It should be a sanctuary from allergens. Tempt your cats to sleep elsewhere.

3. **Wash all bedding in 140-degree hot water at least twice monthly.**
   This eliminates both house-mites and cat allergens (because we know some of you will let them sneak up on the bed every now and then).

4. **Use HEPA air purifiers in rooms your cats frequent.**
   Since cat allergens are so difficult to remove, a good HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) air purifier is essential. They do require continued filter replacement, but certainly help when you are in need of allergy relief.

5. **Vacuum cat allergens with a HEPA vacuum cleaner twice weekly.**
   Vacuum walls, carpet, flooring, chairs, and furniture. Because cat allergens are very small and invasive, you really have to do a thorough job. Good hand tools on your vacuum cleaner are the answer here. Installing a central vacuum will help pick up the rest.

6. **Use a vapor steam cleaner to clean your home.**
   In addition to vacuuming, vapor steam cleaners have proven to be extremely helpful in eliminating cat allergens without using chemicals.

7. **Wash your hands immediately after cat contact and do not rub your eyes.**
   Rubbing your eyes can result in discomfort for hours. Use a strong antibacterial soap to avoid this problem.

8. **Clean your cat.**
   Some people wash their cats to reduce the amount of allergens, but research seems to be conflicting about effectiveness. Allerpet, a liquid product, or a damp cloth to rid fur of visible dander can be used instead. A majority of cats would prefer these to the highly dreaded bath.

9. **Confine your cats to one area of the house.**
   This may be difficult, but it at least allows you to concentrate air purifier and cleaning efforts.
10. You DO NOT have to get rid of your CAT!
If you do a good job with 1-9, your cat-allergy symptoms should be significantly reduced.

**Children, Allergies and Cats**

If your child misses a lot of school due to illness, maybe you should get a cat. Research has shown that children who own pets attend school up to 9 more days a year than their counterparts without. The immune systems of cat owners are more stable, making them better able to fend off illness. They simply visit doctors less.

What about allergies? Isn't cat fur a common source of irritation to immune systems? A leading theory under investigation by asthma researchers suggests that the presence of pets in the home from an early age may influence the immune system so it is less sensitive to allergens later in life. It may in fact be the lack of animals in the life of a child that contributes to asthma sensitivities.

Studies have also connected pet ownership with cardiovascular benefits and reduced anxiety. A recent long-term study showed that people who never owned a cat faced a 40% greater risk of death from heart attack than current and even previous cat owners. State University of New York researchers found that the cat does not have to be present to achieve this. A group of stockbrokers with hypertension who owned pets had lower blood pressure even when not with them. It is well known that pet owners have lower anxiety levels overall, so perhaps the health advantages are a result of being more relaxed.

Pet ownership may be a surprising remedy for absenteeism. However, good health and more days at school are just two of the many benefits of children having an animal in their lives. Studies have also associated numerous psychological benefits.

Children who live with animals tend to show more empathy for those around them. This translates into being able to understand others better. A study of 455 school children between the ages of 11 and 16 revealed that those with pets had an increased ability to detect non-verbal communications. As a result, they were more popular with classmates and more likely to be involved in sports, hobbies, clubs and other social activities. Some studies have even shown that children who live with cats have a higher IQ. In addition, children with pets develop an early sense of responsibility and this may translate into other areas of life.

Social skills and responsibility make a great foundation. A study of 394 university students revealed that those who owned dogs or cats were more self-confident than those who did not. This may be related to other findings that children raised with pets have higher self-esteem, thought to result from the unconditional love an animal gives. No matter what is going on at school or with family, a pet will treat a child the same way. Many talk to their pets and regard them as important confidants. A study of 600 children between the ages of 3 and 18 showed that...
those with pets who have learning disabilities or divorced parents cope better with life. Again, a pet can cushion other difficulties.

It is not surprising that animals have been used successfully in therapy for some time now. They help sick children relax and take their minds off their illnesses. Some doctors recognize the importance of pets and ensure that their names are included in medical records with other family members. Even in the most depressing clinical environment, talking about a furry friend can lighten a situation.

If you already have animal members in your family, know that they are doing your children a world of good. If you do not, it is worth serious consideration.