



Coping with Allergies

BEHAVIOR
SERIES

B *EING A PET OWNER IS NEVER EASY.* While pets bring us joy and companionship on a daily basis, they also require training, veterinary care, time, love, attention, and even tolerance. Tolerance is especially necessary when a pet owner is allergic to his or her companion animal.

Studies show that approximately 15 percent of the population is allergic to dogs or cats. An estimated one-third of Americans who are allergic to cats (about two million people) live with at least one cat in their household anyway. In a study of 341 adults who were allergic to cats or dogs and had been advised by their physicians to give up their pets, only one out of five did. What's more, 122 of them got another pet after a previous one had died. It's clear the benefits of pet companionship outweigh the drawbacks of pet allergies for many owners. Living comfortably with a companion animal despite being allergic to him requires a good understanding of the allergic condition and an adherence to a few rules.

Basics

All cats and dogs are allergenic (allergy-causing) to people who are allergic to animals. Cats tend to be more allergenic than dogs for allergic people, although some people are more sensitive to dogs than cats. Contrary to popular belief, there are no “non-allergenic” breeds of dogs or cats; even hairless breeds may be highly allergenic.

Dogs with soft, constantly growing hair—poodles or bichon frises, for example—may be less irritating to some individuals, although this may be because they are

bathed and groomed more frequently. One dog or cat of a particular breed may be more irritating to an individual allergy sufferer than another animal of that same breed.

What is the source of irritation to pet-allergic humans? Glands in the animal's skin secrete tiny allergy-triggering proteins, called allergens, that linger in the animal's fur but also float easily in the air. Allergens are present in the animal's saliva and urine, too, and may become airborne when saliva dries on the fur. The severity of reaction to these allergens varies from one person to the next, ranging from mild sniffing and sneezing to life-threatening asthma, and can be complicated by simultaneous allergies to other irritants in the environment.

Solutions

If your or a family member's allergies are simply miserable, but not life-threatening, take these steps to reduce the symptoms.

- Create an “allergy-free” zone in the home—preferably the bedroom—and strictly prohibit the pet's access to it. Use a high-efficiency HEPA air cleaner (available at almost any home and garden store or discount

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