BEHAVIOR SERIES

Coping with Allergies

BEING 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 sniffling 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

continued on reverse side

department store) in the bedroom. Consider using impermeable covers for the mattress and pillows because allergen particles brought into the room on clothes and other objects can accumulate in them.

- Use HEPA air cleaners throughout the rest of the home, and avoid dust-and-dander-catching furnishings such as cloth curtains and blinds and carpeted floors. Clean frequently and thoroughly to remove dust and dander, washing articles such as couch covers and pillows, curtains, and pet beds. Use a "microfilter" bag in the vacuum cleaner to effectively catch all the allergens.
- Bathing your pet on a weekly basis can reduce the level of allergens on fur by as much as 84 percent. Although products are available that claim to reduce pet allergens when sprayed on the animal's fur, studies show they are less effective than a weekly bath. Even cats can become accustomed to being bathed; check with your veterinarian's staff or a good book on pet care for directions about how to do this properly, and use whatever shampoo your veterinarian recommends.
- Don't be quick to blame the family pet for allergies. Ask your allergist to specifically test for allergies to pet dander, rather than making an assumption. And understand that allergies are cumulative. Many allergy sufferers are sensitive to more than one allergen. So if you're allergic to dust, insecticides, pollen, cigarette smoke, and cat dander, you'll need to reduce the overall allergen level in your environment by concentrating on all of the causes, not just the pet allergy. For example, you may need to step up measures to remove cat dander from your home and carefully avoid cigarette smoke during spring, when it's difficult to avoid exposure to pollen.
- Immunotherapy (allergy shots) can improve symptoms but cannot eliminate them entirely. It works by gradually desensitizing a person's immune system to the pet allergens. Allergy-causing proteins are injected under the person's skin, triggering the body to produce antibodies (protective proteins) which block the pet allergen from causing a reaction. Patients are usually given one dose per week for a few weeks to months (depending on the severity of the allergy) and then can often manage with one injection per month.
- Additional treatments for allergies to pets are symptomatic, including steroidal and antihistamine nose sprays and antihistamine pills. For asthma, multiple medications, sprays, and inhalers are available. It is important to find an allergist who understands your commitment to living with your pet. A combination of approaches—medical control of symptoms, good housecleaning methods, and immunotherapy—is most likely to succeed in allowing an allergic person to live with pets.

Of course, if you do not currently have a pet and are considering one and know you are pet-allergic, be sure to consider carefully whether you can live with the allergy before you bring a new pet home. Except in the case of children, who sometimes outgrow allergies, few allergy sufferers become accustomed to pets to whom they are allergic. Too many allergic owners obtain pets without thinking through the difficulties of living with them. And too often, they end up relinquishing pets, a decision that is difficult for the owner and can be life-threatening for the pet.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
©2000 Dumb Friends League and ©2003 The HSUS.
All rights reserved.

This information provided for you by

Town of Truckee Animal Control
530-582-7830
www.townoftruckee.com

Humane Society of Truckee-Tahoe
530-587-5948
www.hstt.org

Promoting the Protection of All Animals

THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES®

2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037
202-452-1100 ▪ www.hsus.org