

A young child with curly hair is smiling and holding a brown guinea pig. The child is wearing a light blue shirt. The background is a blurred green field.

When Pets Are a Problem

Cute, Cuddly,
and ... **Achooo!**

When a child has asthma or an allergy to fur and pet dander, having a cat, dog, gerbil, rabbit, or similar pet in or around the house can be a problem. Here's what parents can do to help.

By Michael J. Welch, M.D., FAAP

Furry pets are among the most common and potent causes of allergy symptoms. However, fur usually is not the only animal allergen. Even shorthaired, “non-shedding” animals leave a trail of dander and saliva.

Cats are commonly more allergenic than dogs. Although certain breeds of dogs are said to be less allergenic than others, studies don't support the claim. Comparisons of dogs also show wide differences in levels of allergen-creation between individual dogs of the same breed. Reptiles, fish, and amphibians are not generally causes of allergy.

Making Adjustments

For families with a member allergic to an animal that are deeply attached to their animals, the notion of finding another home for a pet is hard to accept. Many prefer to keep the animal and battle on against allergy symptoms. If you can't part with your pet, at least keep it out of your allergic child's bedroom, and sweep, dust, and vacuum frequently.

Another solution may be to keep your cat or dog permanently outdoors with adequate shelter. Weekly bathing in tepid water has also been shown to lower a pet's potential allergens, including animals that never venture out of doors, but doing this regularly and consistently is often not realistic. Long after an animal has left the family home, animal allergens can persist due to hair and dander left behind.

Before You Consider a New Pet ...

It is unwise to bring home a furry pet if you have a strong family history of allergies and, consequently, a high risk that infants and young children in your home could develop allergies. Better to wait a few years and, then, if there are no signs of trouble and your child's allergy tests are clear, you may want to look into pet ownership. Try to expose your child to the pet a few times before bringing the pet home, just to see if there are any allergic symptoms that would indicate this is not the right move for your child.

A household pet may be unjustly blamed for causing allergy symptoms. Don't automatically banish Fido to the doghouse unless your child's been tested and the results suggest that your child has an animal allergy.

Occasionally, symptoms that seem to be caused by an animal may be, in fact, due to other allergies, such as to pollen or mold. What happens is that Fido and Felix explore outdoors, then come back into the house with a load of pollen granules and mold spores in their coats. Every time the hay fever sufferer pats the pets, he stirs up an invisible cloud of allergens that triggers symptoms. ●

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Tips for Handling Pet Allergies

More than 70 percent of U.S. households have a dog or cat, according to the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology (ACAAI). People with allergies should be cautious in deciding what type of pet they can safely bring into their home. The ACAAI offers the following advice:

- Pet exposure may cause sneezing and wheezing. An estimated 10 percent of the population may be allergic to animals, and 20 to 30 percent of individuals with asthma have pet allergies.
- The best types of pets for an allergic patient are pets that don't have hair or fur, shed dander, or produce excrement that creates allergic problems. Tropical fish are ideal, but very large aquariums could add to the humidity in a room, which could result in an increase of molds and house dust mites. Other hypoallergenic pets include reptiles and turtles, but be aware that turtles can spread salmonella, a highly contagious bacterial disease. (See item on p. 5 under “Ask the Pediatrician” for more information.)
- If the family is unwilling to remove the pet, it should at least be kept out of the patient's bedroom and, if possible, outdoors. Allergic individuals should not pet, hug, or kiss their pets because of the allergens on the animal's fur or saliva.
- Indoor pets should be restricted to as few rooms in the home as possible. Isolating the pet to one room, however, will not entirely limit the allergens to that room. Air currents from forced-air heating and air-conditioning will spread the allergens throughout the house. Homes with forced-air heating and/or air-conditioning may be fitted with a central air cleaner. This may remove significant amounts of pet allergens from the home. The air cleaner should be used at least four hours per day. The use of heating and air-conditioning filters and HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Arresting) filters as well as vacuuming carpets, cleaning walls and washing the pet with water are all ways of reducing exposure to the pet allergen.
- When it comes to diagnosing pet allergies, most are pretty obvious — symptoms occur soon after exposure. But sometimes the allergy is subtler. Skin tests or special allergy blood tests can be done, if necessary, to confirm a suspicion of an animal allergy. One way to confirm a pet's significance as an allergen, is to remove the pet from the home for several weeks and do a thorough cleaning to remove the residual hair and dander. It is important to keep in mind that it can take weeks of thorough cleaning to remove all the animal hair and dander before a change in the allergic patient is noted.
- Allergy shots (immunotherapy) may be needed for cat or dog allergies, particularly when the animal cannot be avoided. They are typically given for at least three years and may decrease symptoms of asthma and allergy. They are not recommended as routine treatment for pet allergy in children, though. Avoidance and pet elimination are the preferred approach.