

Pets and asthma

FACT SHEET prepared by the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

Many families choose a cuddly cat or dog for their family pet. However, these seemingly harmless animals can be trigger factors for some people with asthma. In general, cats produce more severe allergic reactions than dogs. Other pets and animals, such as birds, rabbits, guinea pigs, rats and mice and horses carry allergens that could trigger asthma. However, recent research has shown that exposure to cats and dogs and farm animals in early life might reduce a child's risk of allergic disease. More study is needed in this area.

What is it about my pet that causes my asthma?

Allergens are found in the pet's saliva, hair, urine and dander (dead skin flakes). A substance that triggers an allergic reaction is called an allergen.

These pet allergens are carried in the air on very small particles. The pet's dander, which is shed on carpet and upholstery, is also a food source for the house dust mite. For further information on allergens and house dust mites see the fact sheets "Asthma and allergy", "House dust mites", the booklet "Triggers in Asthma" or visit our website asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz

What happens if I am allergic to animal dander?

Symptoms may occur within minutes of your exposure to the animal. For some people however, symptoms may build up over several hours and be most severe 12 hours after initial contact with the pet. For some people, this may even be life threatening. If a pet comes inside, its shedding becomes part of the house dust and is present even when the animal is outside. In these circumstances, it may be difficult to recognise it as an allergic reaction that is due to the animal.

If I am allergic to an animal how can I decrease my exposure to animal dander?

The ideal solution is to remove the pet from the home and, wherever possible, avoid contact with other pets or the homes they inhabit.

Keeping a furry pet is discouraged if it triggers asthma. However, if this is not an option there are ways to minimise your exposure to its allergens.

Tips on how to manage your pet:

- Have the pet live outside the house, provide pets with comfortable and safe housing outside the home. Birds should be kept in an outside aviary away from the house.
- Always ensure pets are kept out of the bedroom. Many hours are spent in this room sleeping, and keeping the pet out at all times will reduce your or your child's exposure significantly.
- Try to keep the pet out of any other rooms in which a great deal of time is spent. Remember pets will leave allergens behind after they have left the room.
- Ask a non-allergic friend or family member to brush the pet outside. This will remove any loose hair and allergens from the pet, reducing the amount shed indoors. The

animal's litter box or cage should be cleaned out regularly. Again, this is a task for a non-allergic person. Urine is the source of allergens in rabbits, guinea pigs, rats and mice.

- Washing the cat or dog weekly will significantly reduce the amount of allergen released into the environment. Consult a veterinarian for advice regarding the pet's skin care to prevent excessive dryness due to frequent washing.
- The allergen accumulates in areas such as carpets, mattresses, cushions and curtains as well as horizontal surfaces. The allergen particle is so small that it passes through fabrics, so it is suggested that mattresses and cushions be covered with suitable coverings to prevent the release of allergens when squeezed. For information on covers which provide a barrier to dust mite allergens see the fact sheet "House dust mites"
- Have the pet sit on a washable sheet that should be changed and washed daily.
- Vacuuming has little effect on these allergens as it does not reach the lower levels of the carpet where the tiny particles settle. It may even disturb the small allergen particles, causing them to become airborne. Using a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter system may help prevent the release of the allergen. Remember when using a vacuum cleaner to regularly change the filter.
- The best pets for an allergic person are those that do not have hair. These include turtles, frogs or fish.

The Asthma Foundation can help you

The Asthma Foundation is New Zealand's not-for-profit sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses. We advocate to government and raise awareness of respiratory illnesses, fund research for better treatments and educate on best practice.

Check out our comprehensive website at asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz