

Nothing to be sneezed at

Rebecca Hamilton investigates how you can live with cat allergies

With summer upon us, allergy sufferers may already be stocking up the medicine cabinets in preparation for hayfever season. But what if your coughing, sneezing and itchy eyes occur year round and worse, what if your allergy is attributed to your much-loved family pet?

This is the unfortunate reality for some and while cats might be Britain's favourite pets, they're also thought to be one of the most common causes of allergies. Sadly, many owners decide to give up their cats when symptoms of allergy strike, and while it may seem like the only option, there are many alternatives to ensure you keep your cat companion without impacting your health.

How do cats cause allergies?

Most people believe that airborne cat fur/hair is the cause of allergy symptoms, but this is not always the case. The symptoms you're experiencing are more likely to be caused by a protein called Fel d 1 originating from sebum found in a cat's sebaceous glands. Ironically, a cat's attempts at keeping themselves clean may be the very reason allergies are exacerbated – this protein attaches itself to dried skin called dander and is carried through the air when cats groom themselves.

Dander can spread throughout your home and even be carried on your clothing, so it can often feel difficult to escape your symptoms. In some cases, repeated exposure to an individual cat can ease symptoms over time, although there is not yet enough research to support this.

How do I know if I have an allergy?

Red eyes, runny nose and itching are all signs you might be allergic to something. While these symptoms can be irritating, it is just your immune system's unfortunate way of fighting off substances that might harm your body.

Before you blame your family pet, you need to determine whether it is indeed your cat that is causing your allergic reaction. There are many allergens encountered in the home, with the most common found in dust mites, pollen and mould spores – your itchy eyes and runny nose could just as likely be down to your old mattress rather than your feline friend.

Your local GP is the first place to visit. Simple tests will be able to confirm whether or not your cat is the cause and you'll be able to discuss options such as antihistamine tablets or nasal sprays to ease your symptoms in the interim.

What next?

Taking antihistamines might be a good short term solution but adapting your lifestyle is the only way you'll be able to cope with your allergy symptoms in the long term. Reducing the amount of allergens in your home is key and there are a number of simple things you can do.

Close encounters

- Avoid letting your cat lick your hands or face. Cats harbour many bacterial organisms in their mouth and allergens are particularly present in saliva
- Keep your cat's fur clean. While previous advice suggested that bathing a cat would reduce the spread of dander, this is no longer recommended for owners or the cat, and we would certainly not recommend anyone washes their cat unless absolutely necessary! Using cleansing wipes to gently remove allergens from the fur is a much less stressful way to keep your kitty clean
- Although it might seem obvious, washing your hands after petting your cat is highly important. We touch our face many times throughout the day and forgetting to clean your hands thoroughly can worsen your symptoms



In the zone

- Designate areas in the house as pet-free zones to limit the amount of dander in the household. While you might enjoy having your cat sleep on your bed, allergies often become worse at night and keeping your moggy away from your bedroom is a good way to relieve your symptoms
- Grooming your cat regularly can result in fewer allergens being released into the atmosphere. Make sure you brush them outside in the garden and preferably in old clothes to ensure no allergens filter through to your home
- Insulated homes don't just trap heat, they trap allergens too. Opening windows for an hour each day can increase ventilation

House rules

- If your house is carpeted, it is important you vacuum often. Cat hair and dander can easily get caught in the carpet and intensify your symptoms, so a thorough clean at least once a week is recommended. Sprinkle baking soda, a substance harmless to cats, on your floor before you vacuum to eliminate any pet odours
- Although hardwood or linoleum floors don't attract hair in the same way, it is important you vacuum these areas too as sweeping will push allergens back into the air
- Wash your cat's bedding, accessories and litter trays regularly. Fel d 1 can also be released through your pet's saliva or urine, so keeping these items fresh is important

Shop smart

There are a number of great products designed for those suffering from allergies and adapting your lifestyle will ensure that you and your cat continue to live side by side.

- Invest in a washable allergen pillow and cover. Made from polyester and cotton, the fabric prevents a collection of allergy triggers and can be washed easily and regularly without damage
- While fresh air is important to keep allergies at bay, unpredictable weather means it isn't always possible to keep windows open. An air purifier will limit the amount of allergens in your home
- Using a vacuum with a HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) filter limits the amount of dander into the atmosphere. Alternatively, you can choose to wear a dust mask when using your vacuum
- Allergy control solutions, such as sprays, can be used on furniture and upholstery to alter cat allergens and make them less reactive. Use these according to manufacturer's instructions and check they are safe for use around pets

While it might take some time and a little trial and error to find out what is best for you and your cat, there are plenty of solutions that don't have to result in you giving up your family pet. Hopefully these tips will make a world of difference. For more advice on cats and people, take a look at our *Cats and people* Essential Guide at www.cats.org.uk/cat-care/care-leaflets/essential-guides ●

Editor's note: If you suffer from allergies, enter our competition on pages 40-41 for a chance to win a Dyson vacuum cleaner worth £400. Dyson's range of upright and canister vacuums is certified asthma – and allergy-friendly by the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.