



# Cat Allergy

Over 10 million people in the United States suffer from cat allergy, which can lead to allergic rhinitis and asthma.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike pollen-related allergies, cat allergy can occur year-round, due to continual exposure. The allergens shown to affect cat-allergic patients can be found in most environments, even those in which a cat has never been. Individuals with cat allergies develop symptoms rapidly after entering a location where a cat is present, suggesting that the cat allergens are airborne. Studies have confirmed the airborne nature of cat-related allergens, finding that the particles containing the cat allergens are very small and sticky. This allows the cat allergens to remain in the air, regardless of airflow, and enables the allergens to stick on virtually any surface.<sup>2</sup>

## WHAT CAUSES CAT ALLERGY?

It was once thought that cat allergy was caused only by the animal's dander. More recently, it has been determined that cat allergens can be found in the animal's saliva, tears, anal glands and sebaceous glands of the skin. The most common allergen found to sensitize cat-allergic individuals is a protein called Fel d 1. This protein causes sensitization in approximately 90% of cat-allergic people.<sup>2</sup>



## WHERE DOES CAT ALLERGEN SENSITIZATION OCCUR?

Studies have demonstrated that over 50% of cat-allergic individuals have never owned a cat.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that many people develop a cat allergy due to exposures outside of their home environment. Exposure can occur through direct contact with a cat in another environment or from cat allergens that are brought into work or school on a cat owner's clothing.

## WHERE IS CAT ALLERGEN FOUND IN THE HOME?

Cat allergens can be found throughout the home, since they are airborne. There are, however, certain areas that seem to accumulate cat allergens, such as carpeting, upholstered furniture, mattresses, bedding, curtains and soft toys. Cat allergen can also be detected on walls, due to the sticky nature of these particles.



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## DIAGNOSING CAT ALLERGY

If a cat allergy is suspected, the doctor will often perform a skin test to determine if the allergy exists. In a skin test, small droplets of cat allergen will be applied to or under the skin. If positive, a red, raised area will develop around the site where the cat extract was applied. If there is no reaction, allergy is not suspected. Your medical history and a physical exam, in combination with an allergy diagnostic test (skin or serum) will help your physician identify a cat allergy.

## HOW CAN CAT ALLERGY BE TREATED?

Once diagnosed with a cat allergy, steps must be taken to reduce direct and indirect contact with cats. Avoidance of cat allergens is almost impossible. Temporary removal of the cat from the home in an effort to determine its contribution to a patient's symptoms is often recommended. All too often, however, removing the cat is usually not enough since cat allergens remain in the home for months after the cat is gone.

Does cleaning really help? Unfortunately, the answer is “no, not very much.” The use of chemicals may initially reduce concentrations of cat allergen, but only for about a week. Increasing ventilation does not have any significant influence on cat allergen levels either. Washing the cat every week reduces the shedding of cat allergens, but it is still unknown whether washing the cat will significantly reduce cat allergen levels. If symptoms persist regardless of the cat allergen exposure, then both medication and allergy shots should be considered.

## TREATING CAT ALLERGY WITH IMMUNOTHERAPY

Allergy immunotherapy is a treatment that reduces or completely alleviates your allergy symptoms<sup>5</sup>. With this treatment, your body builds up a resistance to the allergens that currently impact your day-to-day living. After six months on treatment, symptoms should start to decrease, as will your need for symptomatic medications that control the allergy-associated sneeze, runny nose, cough, wheeze or hives. As an additional benefit, immunotherapy may prevent the onset of other allergies or the development of asthma in children<sup>5</sup>. Scientific studies have shown that the results of immunotherapy are maintained for a minimum of 5-10 years after the course of treatment has been completed.<sup>4</sup> Among the wide variety of treatment possibilities available today, allergy immunotherapy is the only treatment that targets the underlying cause of allergy and alters the natural course of the disease<sup>5</sup>. Immunotherapy is not without risks. Possible side effects may include: itching, redness and swelling at the injection site and sometimes soreness hours after an injection. These local reactions are not considered serious. Although rare, a full body allergic reaction, called anaphylaxis, can occur following an injection. To reduce the risk associated

with allergy immunotherapy, it is recommended to wait in your physician's office for 30 minutes following an immunotherapy injection.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT IMMUNOTHERAPY

Consult an Allergy Specialist. If you experience allergic symptoms, it is important to talk to a doctor who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of allergic diseases. Based on your past history and specific testing, your Allergy Specialist will be able to determine if you are a candidate for immunotherapy treatment.

### References

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