



ALLERGY TO CATS

It is estimated that one-third of all U.S. households own a cat and that one-third of cat owners are allergic to their cats. This amounts to 6 million individuals! Studies have shown that the material that is responsible for causing the allergic reaction (allergen) is concentrated in cat dander and saliva. It is identical in different breeds of cats. Its microscopic particle size allows it to remain airborne for several hours. Allergy symptoms result when it is inhaled into the nose or lungs of sensitive individuals. Cat allergen is extremely difficult to remove from an area once present. After a cat has been removed from a home, it takes 6 months or longer for cat allergen to dissipate. Therefore, a trial of cat avoidance for its effect on symptom relief must be a minimum of 6 months in length or one may get the false impression that they are not allergic to cats. Cat allergen has been found to accumulate in carpeting and mattresses where it has been detected as long as 5 years after a cat has been removed from a home! Indirect contact with cat allergen can cause significant symptoms in schools and workplaces. Because individuals are not allergic to cat hair, there is no validity to the assumption that shorthaired breeds cause less allergy symptoms than longhaired breeds!

Cat allergen is a potent trigger of asthma, allergic rhinitis and eczema symptoms. It is imperative that cat sensitive individuals with severe allergies remove cats from their homes. Symptom improvement can be expected to occur gradually over several months as cat allergen dissipates from the home. Several other measures can significantly decrease cat allergen in the home. While it cannot be recommended that cat allergic individuals continue to keep cats in their homes, these measures may allow some individuals with more mild allergies to live safely in a home with a cat.

1. If a cat remains in the home, it should be kept strictly out of the bedroom and should be limited to a single area of the home.
2. Carpeting and upholstered furniture should be removed – especially in the bedroom.
3. Impermeable plastic encasings should be placed over the mattress, box spring and pillows.
4. Hands should be washed and clothes changed after contact with a cat.
5. Use of a facemask and vacuum cleaner with an exhaust filter may help when cleaning.
6. A room HEPA filter can decrease airborne cat allergen concentration by more than 50%. This is true only if no carpeting is present and the cat is excluded from the room.
7. Treating carpeting with 3% tannic acid (Allergy Control Solution) decreases cat allergen content significantly. This is helpful only if the cat is not allowed in the treated room.
8. Bathing the cat weekly decreases airborne cat allergen significantly.

Allergy shots (immunotherapy) with cat allergen is an option for some cat sensitive individuals who find cat avoidance impossible.