



ALLERGY TO ANIMALS

Allergy to animals such as cats, dogs, farm animals (horses, cattle, sheep, hogs and goats) and laboratory animals (rabbits, rats, mice, gerbils, hamsters and guinea pigs) is common. The material that causes the allergic reaction (allergen) may be found in saliva, skin dander and urine (an important source of rodent allergens). When allergic individuals contact these allergens, symptoms of asthma, eczema and/or nasal or eye allergy may occur.

DOGS

Dander and saliva (not hair) are the two most common sources of allergen. Therefore, short-haired breeds of dog do not necessarily cause less allergy symptoms than do long-haired breeds. There can be variations in allergic reactivity to different breeds of dogs, but this is inconsistent and not predictable.

Individuals with significant allergy to dogs should remove the dog from the home. It may take several months after the dog is removed for allergens to dissipate significantly and for symptom improvement to occur. While it cannot be recommended that people with allergy to dogs keep dogs in their homes, individuals who have mild allergy symptoms and who wish to keep their dog indoors will benefit from keeping their dogs strictly out of the bedroom, removing carpeting (especially in the bedroom) and by washing hands and changing clothes after dog contact.

Immunotherapy with the currently available non-purified dog allergens has not been shown to be highly effective. This may change in the near future once purified dog allergens become available.

FARM ANIMALS

Individuals sensitive to farm animals must avoid not only direct contact with the animal and the barn or stable in which they are kept, but also indirect contact with persons and objects connected with the handling of these animals. Individuals who have contact with these animals (horseback riders, stock handlers, stable personnel, gardeners exposed to manure fertilizers, etc.) should change clothes and wash well before entering the home to ensure that the allergen is not brought indoors.

In years past, horse, hog, goat and cattle hair were used as padding in furniture and mattresses, carpet mattings and in felts. These uses have now been largely replaced by synthetic materials. Any such old furnishings should be removed from the home of sensitive individuals. Animal hair may also be found in old mortar and plaster preparations, and in Oriental and Indian rugs.

Many garments are made from animal skin and hair sources, including various furs, cashmere (goats), mohair (goats), alpaca, vicuna and camel's hair. These processed materials seldom cause allergic reactions in those who develop allergic symptoms upon exposure to the living animal. Dander is removed in commercial processing. This is also true for sheep's wool. Many patients feel that wool fibers aggravate their allergic respiratory symptoms or that contact with wool causes skin irritation and eczema to flare. The physical properties of wool are such that these could represent irritant effects rather than true allergy. Wool products and clothing are likely to be contaminated with house dust mite allergen and this may be the trigger for allergic symptoms with exposure to wool.

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RODENTS AND RABBITS

Rodent allergens are concentrated in the urine. People highly allergic to mice, rats, gerbils, guinea pigs and/or hamsters should remove these pets from their homes. Should the rodents remain indoors, they should be kept strictly out of the bedroom and strictly caged. The cage should be cleaned daily to remove urine, the source of the allergen. Laboratory workers exposed to these animals should wash and change clothes before entering the home to prevent allergens from being brought indoors.

Recommendations for people allergic to rabbits are similar to those for people sensitive to rodents. Soft yarn spun from angora rabbit fur is used for making infant clothing, sweaters, scarves and many other items. As with other animal hairs, processed rabbit hair materials seldom cause allergic reactions in those who develop allergic symptoms when exposed to live rabbits. Allergens are removed in commercial processing.

FEATHERS

Chickens, goose and duck feathers, and less often down, may cause allergy symptoms in some individuals. The most common sources of exposure are pillows, comforters, quilts and feather beds. Many individuals who experience allergy symptoms with exposure to feather containing items are actually experiencing symptoms due to dust mite exposure and sensitivity. Very high concentrations of dust mites are found in items stuffed with feathers and down. Whether truly sensitive to feathers or to dust mites, the use of feather pillows and down comforters should be avoided.

Less commonly, feathers from pet parrots, parakeets, canaries, pigeons and other birds may cause allergic reactions. Sensitive individuals should not have pet birds inside the home. Birds that do remain in the home should not be allowed to fly loose, but should be kept caged and out of the bedroom. Cages should be kept clean.

Feather sensitive individuals can safely ingest meat and eggs from fowl without danger unless they also have allergy to eggs or fowl meat. Similarly, egg-grown vaccines do not pose a problem to feather sensitive individuals that are not also egg sensitive.