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[Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health](#)

Study reveals link among childhood allergies, asthma symptoms, and early life exposure to cats

Can early cat ownership protect children at-risk for asthma?

May 20, 2008 -- A study released by researchers at the Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health (CCCEH) at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, shows that cat ownership may have a protective effect against the development of asthma symptoms in young children at age five. The study, published by the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, found that children with cats in the home were more likely to have made allergy-related antibodies to cats. At three years of age, children who had made antibodies to cats early in life were more likely to have wheeze, a respiratory symptom associated with asthma. However, by age five, the same children who had grown up with a cat were then found to be less likely to have wheeze.

This finding suggests that prolonged cat ownership and early life exposure to cats may have a protective effect against early asthma indicators, such as wheeze, as children reach age five. "While the study design does not allow us to recommend early cat ownership to prevent asthma, it does seem to indicate that avoidance of cats to prevent the development of asthma is not advised. However, once a child has asthma and is allergic to cats, the recommendation would still be to find a new home for the cat," said Matthew Perzanowski, PhD, assistant professor of Environmental Health Sciences at the Mailman School of Public Health and lead author and investigator on the research.

The study is part of a broader multi-year research project started in 1998, which examines the health effects of exposure of pregnant women and babies to indoor and outdoor air pollutants, pesticides, and allergens. The Center's prior research findings have shown that exposure to multiple environmental pollutants are associated with an increase in risk for asthma symptoms among children. For this study, the investigators controlled for other exposures that might have contributed to developmental problems such as socioeconomic factors and exposure to tobacco smoke and other environmental contaminants.

"Today's findings contribute to a further understanding of how the environment impacts child health," said Rachel Miller, MD, Irving Assistant Professor of Clinical Medicine at Columbia University; director, Asthma Project; associate director and lead physician scientist, DISCOVER Initiative, Mailman School's CCCEH; and senior author on the study. "They help us comprehend the complex relationship between early exposure to cats and the risk for asthma symptoms such as wheeze. The presence of cats in the home at a very early age seems to help reduce the risk of developing asthma. This is an important finding given the high prevalence of asthma in New York City and elsewhere."

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Other investigators on the study include Frederica Perera, DrPH, Ginger Chew, ScD, Inge F. Goldstein, DrPH, Robin S. Garfinkel, PhD, Lori A. Hoepner, MPH, Adnan Divjan, Alina Johnson, and Thomas A. E. Platts-Mills, MD, PhD. The study was co-authored by researchers from the Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and the Asthma and Allergic Diseases Center at the University of Virginia. The research was funded by the National Institutes of Health.

About the Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health (Frederica Perera, DrPH, Director)

The Columbia Center for Children's Environmental Health – part of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University –is a leading research organization dedicated to understanding and preventing environmentally related disease in children. Founded in 1998, the Center conducts research in New York City, including a World Trade Center Study, as well as Krakow, Poland, and Chongqing, China. Its mission is to improve the respiratory health and cognitive development of children and to reduce their cancer risk by identifying environmental toxicants and conditions related to poverty that increase their risk of disease. In NYC, the Center collaborates with residents and partner organizations in Washington Heights, Harlem and the South Bronx to share research findings with the local communities in ways that are meaningful and usable in daily life. (www.ccceh.org)

About the Mailman School of Public Health

The only accredited school of public health in New York City, and among the first in the nation, Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health provides instruction and research opportunities to more than 1000 graduate students in pursuit of masters and doctoral degrees. Its students and more than 300 multi-disciplinary faculty engage in research and service in the city, nation, and around the world, concentrating on biostatistics, environmental health sciences, epidemiology, health policy and management, population and family health, and sociomedical sciences. www.mailman.columbia.edu

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