



Tompkins County SPCA

Cat Care Series

Coping with Cat Allergies

There is an old joke among allergists. Tell a patient to get rid of the cat and the patient will get rid of the doctor instead. There is an even older joke among shelter workers. If everyone who abandons their pet at the shelter were telling the truth, 90% of the population would be allergic to cats.

Where is the truth? The truth is that only a relatively small segment of the population, somewhere in the neighborhood of 2%, is truly allergic to cats. More importantly, however, for many people, there's not much merit to giving away the cat anyway.

In fact, in many cases, putting the cat out may be worse. Some new studies have shown that if a child tests positive to pollen and dust mite, but not for cat dander, giving away the cat may lead to the child becoming allergic to cats. In fact, one study showed that kids with a pet in the house get less asthma—and that two pets are more protective than one!

As one commentator noted, it is all part of the “dirt is good for you” theory. Exposing children early in life to dust, dander and other allergens will help the body build up immunity to them, much the same way as vaccinations.

The first rule of thumb, however, is not to self-diagnose. There are many reasons why an allergy is present and the cat may not be the culprit. An allergist (preferably one who loves cats!) can rule out other causes, and can also prescribe allergy medications that may make a world of difference.

But if you are truly allergic to cats and living without Fluffy is worse than living with some sneezing, there is a lot you can do to manage the symptoms. First, get rid of carpeting. Not only are hard wood floors infinitely more stylish, but carpeting harbors allergens—as much as 100 times the amount as bare floors. Second, use a HEPA air filter in the rooms where Fluffy spends most of her time. Third, make your bedroom a “cat free” zone. And finally, wash kitty's bedding (and your own) regularly. No matter how allergic you are to cats, these simple measures can reduce symptoms dramatically.

Is there more you can do? Absolutely, although in many cases it may not be necessary. You can let the sunshine and fresh air in by opening windows, you may put window fans in your house on exhaust, you can brush your kitty outside so that the dander flies away, plant-based non-toxic products are available that can take the sting out of allergens, you can take medication, you can get allergy shots, you can replace upholstery with vinyl which will keep allergens from accumulating, you can (like a well known shelter director with cat allergies) grin and bear it and eventually you may develop an immunity.

But first and foremost, don't rush out and get rid of the family pet. Cats are great for many reasons. They are cute. They are cuddly. They are the perfect antidote to loneliness, boredom, and depression. And now, thanks to new studies, they might even help “vaccinate” your children against asthma—another good reason to keep the cat.