

CAT ALLERGY - IT'S EVERYWHERE! Jeffrey Marcus, M.D., FACS

Why are some people allergic to cats? When people are allergic, it's because they react to specific chemicals that are called "antigens." In the case of cats, the major antigen that causes people to have allergic reactions has been identified. This chemical is present in the cat's saliva and in the glands in the skin. When the cat preens itself, the antigen is deposited on the cat's skin and hair.

Where can you find the cat antigen? Studies have shown that you don't have to be near a cat to find cat allergen. It can be found in such improbable places as stores in shopping malls and in hospital corridors.

One investigator found that about 31% of American homes have one or more cats. It appears that the way that the antigen gets distributed is on the clothing of cat owners. After a person holds a cat for 5 minutes, the shirt they are wearing will have 100 times the amount of cat antigen needed to cause wheezing in a person who has asthma due to cats.

Cat antigen is found not only in homes without cats, but also is found widespread in our environment, including in public places where cats are not permitted. This suggests that clothing disperses the antigen casually.

How can you tell if you are allergic to cats? People who are extremely allergic (such as many asthmatics) know very well that they are sensitive to cats. They usually have an immediate reaction when around the animals. In fact, they may enter a room, sit down on the sofa and immediately know that there must have been a cat there previously, even if there is no cat present at the time.

People whose allergies are not as severe, and who are allergic to many different things may not know that cats are causing part of their problem. In this case, they may be easily tested for allergy to cats either with a skin test or with a blood test to see if they produce antibodies to the cat antigen.

What can you do if you are allergic? Eliminate cats from your home. (I have many patients who wouldn't think of this. They tell me this is not an option!)

Bathe the cat regularly. Once-a-month baths will decrease the amount of antigen the cat produces. Studies have shown that this will result in much lower levels of the antigen on the animal.

Take antihistamines and other allergy medications when you plan to be somewhere where there is a cat or when you have a reaction.

Get tested for cat allergy and take allergy shots. Unlike medications, the injections do not treat symptoms, they treat the underlying problem that occurs in the allergic person's immune system. The injections will re-program your immune system to make you less allergic when you come in contact with the cat antigen.

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