



WITH NICOLE BIJLSMA



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

HOW TO DEAL WITH

PET ALLERGIES

If Fido is turning your home into a sneeze-zone, it's time to get serious about reducing allergens

I couldn't imagine growing up without my dog, so I was interested to hear of a Murdoch Childrens Research Institute study of 5000 infants that found having older siblings and a pet dog reduced their risk of developing an

egg allergy. Other studies show that pet exposure in the first 12 months can reduce the incidence of allergies later in life. But before you start creating a menagerie, be aware that once you're allergic to an animal, it's likely to be for life.

Most people aren't born with a pet allergy, and it usually takes about two years to develop.

The allergen that causes the problem is a protein found in the sweat glands (of cats) and saliva (of dogs), which attach to their hair and skin – this essentially means there are no real “low allergy” breeds of cats and dogs.

The severity of the symptoms depends on your sensitivity and may range from hayfever-like itchy and watery eyes, sneezing, runny or stuffy nose, asthma, eczema, cough or hives to an anaphylactic reaction, for which immediate medical attention is required.

Even after a pet has been removed from a home, the dander (skin cells and hair) can remain as household dust in carpets and furnishings for years, and it may take several months of good housekeeping to remove.

To confirm a pet allergy, visit a GP (who may refer you to an immunologist or allergist) for a skin prick test or a radioallergosorbent blood test (RAST). Be mindful that a negative allergy test in a child doesn't mean that they won't become allergic later in life.

TIPS FOR LIVING WITH A PET ALLERGY

- Choose a low-allergy pet such as a turtle, hermit crab, fish or reptile.
- Don't allow pets inside the home, other than reptiles. If you do, ensure they have a designated mat and are kept out of carpeted areas and bedrooms. Ideally, replace carpets with hard floors.
- Brush your pet weekly outside to remove excess hair and dander.
- Wash pet bedding in hot water of at least 55°C and air it in full sun at least monthly.
- Dust the home and floors with a damp microfibre cloth on a weekly basis.
- Use a vacuum cleaner that's fitted with a HEPA filter, carbon filter (to get rid of the smell) and motorised head to dig into the carpet pile.
- Before moving into a new home, first determine if the previous owners had indoor pets. I've had clients react badly for months as a result of leftover pet dander.

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