

Article: Pet Allergies

by Diane Novak

People's Allergies Don't Always Preclude Pets

If you've been told you can't have pets because of allergies, don't give up hope.

When I was a kid in the Bronx, I was always finding stray animals to bring home. The scenario was always the same, no matter how carefully I prepared my argument for the court (spell that M-O-M), the itchy welts on my face, complete with swollen itchy eyes, and non-stop sneezing betrayed the defense.

I can't tell you how many trips my father and I made to the ASPCA on Tremont Avenue with me sneezing and crying the whole way there. It wasn't just the pets, I'd sneeze and cough whenever we took family trips to the country as well. One day, I vowed, I'd have a house full of animals.

When I met my husband, he lived in "the country" in a house with two cats and two dogs. Hmm...this one was a keeper.

While I was in animal-and-grass nirvana, my allergies were kicking up serious problems for me. One kitty in particular sent me into a sneezing fit whenever we were in the same room together.

What happened next was very interesting. After several months of constant exposure to the animals in my new home, I developed less and less reaction to them. It seemed that as time went by, my sensitivity to the animals' dander was reduced. Isn't this the way allergy shots work?

It didn't happen overnight, and for those who can't "tough" it out there may be some help. Some years ago, research was done at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

According to this study, soaking your cat for 10 minutes in lukewarm distilled water may help human pet allergies.

While this study was done with cats, it seems as though this technique would reap similar rewards with dogs, but it's always a good idea to check it out with your vet first.

So, how does one wash a cat? The doctor in this study suggests starting with a large pan or sink filled with one to two inches of lukewarm water. Just like bathing a baby, you want to have everything you need in one place before you begin. Have towels ready and a nice warm place to put kitty after the bath. Avoid interruptions like the phone or doorbell.

Since cats need security, having something for the cat to grip onto in the sink would help. Suggestions are a heavy towel, piece of mesh window screen or rubber sink mats could help. Having an extra hand nearby would be even better. After you have everything in reach, place the cat in the tub. Push the cat straight down from the center back. This is easier than trying to control each leg. Talk to the animal in a calm voice as you move several cups of the distilled water over his body.

If your cat is especially nervous, there is an all-natural product called Rescue Remedy that can be purchased at any health food store. Place a drop or two on the cat's gums or drop in its' mouth before you get ready and it may reduce stress. (This also helps with trips to the vet.)

Back to the bath. If you're thinking you'd like to use a shampoo while the animal is already wet, skip that step. According to the study, plain water removes dust (a major culprit for allergy sufferers) best. Rinse the cat well, then towel dry her.

But there is one more thing to consider before you get Kitty ready for his bath. Removing one allergen (animal dander) without removing all the others in your home may be futile.

You need to remove the additional dust-collecting items from your home, which could be setting your allergies off. Plants and books that collect dust should be kept out of the bedroom.

Animals should have their own sleeping space, and it shouldn't be yours. Until your symptoms subside, your bedroom should be off limits to the pets.

If your house has a mold problem, get that fixed or nothing will help your allergies. I know one very young child with asthma whose life turned around when his family moved out of an apartment with a serious mold problem. Not only did it help the child, but it enabled the cat to remain with the family.

Please remember most allergies and even asthma are seasonally related.

This child still gets occasional flare-ups at certain times of the year, but that would have happened regardless of living with an animal.

In their concern for their patients, doctors have traditionally recommended a "no pet" policy when it is discovered an allergic or asthmatic child or adult is living with a pet. But is there another way?

A quick poll to shelters reported surrenders due to allergies range from a low of 5 percent to a high of 90 percent. Would it be possible to shift those numbers by incorporating some changes into our homes? Possibly! Talk it over with your doctor, but

understand that he or she may not be thrilled with chancing a medical condition they consider serious.

As a child, Laurene Sandstrom suffered from asthma. Her pets were given to neighbors, but when they continued to find their way home, her mom decided Laurene would have to learn to live with the allergies.

After a few months of discomfort, Laurene discovered her symptoms reduced in intensity. Sound familiar? Who would have guessed that an asthmatic kid would grow up to be shelter manager for the Humane Society of Walden?

As for me, I now reside with two hairy dogs and six cats. It's just too bad my folks didn't have this information when I was growing up. Not only could we have enjoyed owning a pet together, but we could have also saved a life or two along the way.

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