

## Cat Allergy Avoidance Measures

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### CAT ALLERGY QUESTION

Q: Our toddler seems to be developing an allergy to our family cat. We've been told that the best solution is to get rid of the animal, but our pet is a part of our family. We can not bear the thought of finding her a new home. What other options are there? Is there a way to keep our pet with us and keep the allergies under control?

Based on your question, I'll assume that your toddler has symptoms of nasal allergies. The good news is that your toddler is too young to have developed allergic sensitivities to things in the air like cat allergen. Most experts agree that it takes a child's immune system two to three years of continuous exposure to an allergen to provoke the immune system to make allergic antibodies, and the immune system is too immature to respond to allergens in a child less than six months. If your child is having symptoms of nasal allergies at this point, I would refer to them as a pre-allergic condition. Unfortunately, since the person giving you the advice to get rid of the cat, likely knows that cat dander is a very potent allergen. If your child is genetically predisposed to have allergies, it is likely he will become sensitive between the age of four and five. If neither of the child's parents have nasal allergies, perhaps other exposures, such as those found in daycare, are causing your child's "allergy" symptoms. However, if both parents have allergy or asthma symptoms, the odds are greater than 50 percent that your child has those genes to develop allergies as well.

Whoever told you to get rid of the cat was only telling you part of the truth. Cat allergen remains at levels that are unabated for 6-18 months after the cat leaves the home. Routine cleaning, steam cleaning, and shampooing the carpets will not remove the cat allergen from the home. The best ways to remove cat allergen, after the cat leaves, is to remove the carpeting, curtains, and overstuffed furniture. Tannic acid solution is commercially available and has been shown to accelerate the decline in cat allergen in homes. However, tannic acid is the same chemical used to stain weather boots and it tends to make items look and smell like a boot.

I share your concern about finding a new home for a member of your family. As a pet owner myself, I understand that dogs and cats are members of the family. I am also concerned that statistics show that 90 percent of animals that are removed from a home at the direction of a physician are eventually euthanized. Unfortunately, most physicians, when they advise a family to remove a pet from the home, do not realize that they are advising the patient to kill a member of the family.

This is my advice to parents of children who suspect their family member may be allergic to a cat. First, see a board-certified allergist who will not only perform accurate testing, but also collect a complete history. Often times, the blood tests used by pediatricians and family practitioners tend to overestimate the presence of allergies. Similarly, the skin testing techniques used by otolaryngologists often drastically overestimate the frequency of a

positive test. If your child is confirmed to have cat allergy, there are options other than killing the cat. First, if at all possible, the cat should become an outside pet; this will substantially reduce the cat allergen levels in your home. If it isn't possible for your cat to become an outside pet, absolutely keep the cat out of the patient's bedroom. Bathing the cat weekly has been shown in research studies to reduce the cat allergen in homes. Most cats will tolerate bathing if you begin bathing them when they are kittens. If it is too late for that option, there are cat-bathing devices available commercially which have the water rise slowly from the bottom, allowing the cat to tolerate the bath better. I recommend high efficiency vacuum cleaners for people who are allergic to cats, who keep cats. Unlike other allergens that go to the ground within 30 minutes of turning off a vacuum cleaner, cat allergen may remain in the air for several hours after turning off the vacuum cleaner. I would suggest a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter and avoid a water trap vacuum cleaner since water does not trap microscopic allergens, only dirt. Next, absolutely do not allow any additional cats into your home. When the current cat goes to "kitty heaven", don't replace "Fluffy" with another pet. I followed this bit of my own advice at my house after one of my children developed an allergy to a feline member of my family.

A variety of medications and treatments can be used to control allergies. Typically, nasal allergies are controlled with prescription nose sprays such as Nasonex, Flonase, and Nasacort AQ. Oral antihistamine medicines tend to be relatively ineffective in controlling nasal allergies. Patients with asthma will need to be treated with inhaled cortisone as well, to control symptoms. Immunotherapy or allergy shots to cats are quite effective. At least initially, injections would need to be given on a weekly basis in a physician's office and the shots would need to be maintained for a minimum of two to three years. However, even removing all cat allergens from your home, your child will still be exposed to cat allergen on a daily basis. Significant quantities of cat allergens are found in many places where cats have never been, including hospitals, schools, and doctor's offices. It is likely, even if you move to a new home that has never had a cat, your child would continue to have symptoms and continue to need some form of treatment.