

## **PET ALLERGY**

### Cat

Allergies to pets, particularly to cats and dogs, are a common cause of allergic disease including asthma and hayfever. The source of *cat allergen* is in the sebaceous glands in the cat's skin. Cats lick themselves and spread the allergen, which is sticky, and glues itself to hairs, dust particles (forming a persistent aerosol) and all parts of the home. As all cats have sebaceous glands, all cat breeds can potentially cause allergies. Even after removal of the pet, cat allergen can remain distributed throughout the home for up to 6 months and in the cat's bedding for up to 4 years! The allergen is so widespread that it can even be measured in the homes of non-pet owners and on the clothing of co-workers who don't have pets.

### Dog

In *dogs* the main source of allergen is saliva, and this is spread on dander (shed skin particles) and hair. All breeds of cat and dog can potentially cause allergies, although some may not shed as much hair and dander (and therefore allergen) as others.

### Other animals

Although not as common as cat and dog allergy, allergy to other animals including horses, mice, rats, rabbits, guinea pigs and birds is important. Transmission of these allergens on clothes and other items may be sufficient to trigger hay fever and asthma.

For many (but not all) pet allergic children symptoms occur quickly after exposure to the pet, and your doctor or allergy specialist can confirm your suspicion using skin prick tests. A negative skin prick test does not, however, mean that a child won't become allergic to pets later.

## **WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MY CHILD'S PET ALLERGY?**

Changes that are simple to implement and have been proven to be effective:

- do not bring a furred pet into the home
- find an existing pet a new home and remove it's bedding from the home
- do not smoke - exposure to environmental smoke worsens allergic symptoms, and makes a number of allergies including pet allergy more likely to develop

Changes that are difficult to implement or have not yet been proven:

- restrict the pet to one area
- keep the pet out of the patient's bedroom
- use high-efficiency air cleaners, either central or portable
- remove carpet or other reservoirs for allergens in the bedroom
- wash the pet weekly.

In cases when it is difficult to avoid exposure to an animal, ongoing anti-inflammatory therapy or possibly desensitisation ("immunotherapy") are the only available options - speak with your local doctor and allergy specialist.