Allergy to animals

Animal allergies are common and can cause a range of symptoms from sneezing, itchy eyes and skin rashes to more serious reactions like asthma attacks. This factsheet explains what causes animal allergies, how to recognise symptoms, and what you can do to manage them.

The most common animal or pet allergies are to cats and dogs, but some people have allergies to horses or other animals. Allergy to animals can occasionally lead to serious asthma attacks and, very rarely, to serious allergic reactions (anaphylaxis). If you have allergy symptoms when you're around animals, you can visit your GP. They may refer you to an allergy specialist if needed.

What causes allergy to animals?

People who have an allergy to pets or other animals are sensitive to proteins in their saliva, urine or dander – dead skin cells which are shed as flakes of skin. With cat allergy, the main proteins involved are made by sweat, salivary and anal glands. Although it can look like pet fur causes the allergy, it's usually the dander or saliva which collect on the fur.

In people with a pet allergy, the body's immune system wrongly identifies the proteins as a threat. When this happens, the body releases chemicals, such as histamine, in response. It is the release of these chemicals that cause symptoms.

Common sources

Allergies to cats and dogs are the most common animal allergies, but some people are allergic to other animals with fur, feathers or scales, including horses, rabbits, mice, hamsters, rats, gerbils, guinea pigs, birds and iguanas.

Who might develop an animal allergy?

Anyone can develop an animal allergy—even if you've never had problems with animals before. Allergies often appear after you've been exposed to animals for some time, so symptoms usually start in later childhood or adulthood.

You're more likely to develop an animal allergy if you already have hay fever, asthma or other allergies. Having a close relative with allergic conditions can also increases the chance, because susceptibility to allergies often runs in families — but it doesn't mean someone will definitely become allergic.

It is possible to outgrow a pet allergy, but like other respiratory allergies, if they develop in later childhood they tend to last for longer periods of time.

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What are the symptoms of animal allergy?

Animal allergies can affect your:

- **nose and eyes:** sneezing, runny or blocked nose, itchy or watery eyes, postnasal drip (mucus running down your throat), red or swollen eyes
- **skin:** itchy rash, hives (urticaria), eczema flare-ups
- **breathing:** coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, difficulty breathing, shortness of breath

Allergies to animals such as horses, cats and dogs can look like hay fever, as the symptoms—such as sneezing, runny nose, and itchy eyes—are similar and often triggered by being outdoors.

More serious symptoms

While most animal allergies cause mild to moderate symptoms, there are important risks for some people, particularly those with asthma:

Asthma attacks: for people with both asthma and animal allergy, exposure to animal allergens can trigger asthma symptoms. If your asthma is poorly controlled, this can lead to severe, even life-threatening, **asthma attacks requiring urgent treatment**. Asthma attacks related to animal allergens often begin within **15 to 30** minutes of exposure. If you have asthma and an animal allergy, it's crucial to keep your asthma well managed and follow your healthcare provider's advice.

If you have both asthma and an animal allergy, make sure your asthma is well controlled and follow your healthcare provider's advice to reduce your risk.

Anaphylaxis: it is very rare, but serious allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) to animal allergens can occur. Anaphylaxis often involves one or more of the following **ABC** symptoms:

- **AIRWAY** - swelling in the throat, tongue or upper airways, hoarse voice, difficulty swallowing
- **BREATHING** - sudden onset wheezing, breathing difficulty, noisy breathing, persistent cough
- **CIRCULATION** - dizziness, feeling faint, sudden sleepiness, confusion, pale clammy skin, loss of consciousness or collapse

Most healthcare professionals consider an allergic reaction to be anaphylaxis when it involves difficulty breathing or affects the heart rhythm or blood pressure. Any one or more of the **ABC** symptoms above may be present.

In extreme cases there could be a dramatic fall in blood pressure. The person may become weak and floppy and may have a sense of something terrible happening.

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Any of the ABC symptoms may lead to collapse and loss of consciousness and, on rare occasions, can be fatal.

Read more about anaphylaxis.

Getting a diagnosis

If you notice allergy symptoms only when you are around certain animals (but don't have a pet at home), it's often straightforward to link your symptoms to animal exposure. However, if you live with a pet, symptoms may be more constant or harder to pinpoint, and can sometimes be mistaken for allergies to other things like dust mites or pollen.

If you think you may have an animal allergy, see your GP who can refer you to a specialist allergy clinic if needed. They can find a clinic in your area from the British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology (BSACI).

Testing

At your appointment, the doctor or nurse will ask about your symptoms and medical history. To help confirm an allergy, they may recommend:

- **Skin prick testing:** a small amount of animal allergen is placed on your skin, which is then gently scratched. If you are allergic, a small itchy bump will appear within minutes.
- **Blood testing:** a sample of your blood is tested for specific allergy antibodies (IgE) to animal allergens. Higher levels suggest an allergy.

It's important that these tests are interpreted by an experienced allergy specialist.

Sometimes, tests can show a positive result even if you don't have symptoms, or may miss an allergy if you do. That's why test results are always considered alongside your medical history and symptoms.

Read more about allergy testing.

Treating symptoms of allergy to animals

Avoiding animals is the most effective way to prevent allergy symptoms, but this isn't always possible—or desirable—especially if you have pets at home. If you can't fully avoid contact with animals, there are treatments and practical steps that can help reduce your symptoms.

It's important to know that simply removing a cat or dog from the home for a short time is unlikely to help. Animal allergens can remain in household dust for months or even years after a pet has left.

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Whilst avoiding much-loved pets can be very upsetting, limiting their access to certain areas—such as bedrooms and sitting rooms—may help reduce symptoms. Regular vacuuming and washing your pet frequently can also reduce the spread of allergens in the dust at home.

Managing mild to moderate symptoms

- **Antihistamines:**
  Over-the-counter antihistamine tablets or syrup can help with sneezing, itching, and a runny nose. These are available from pharmacies and supermarkets, or your doctor can prescribe them if needed.
- **Nasal sprays and eye drops:**
  For nasal or eye symptoms, your doctor may recommend steroid or saline nasal sprays and allergy eye drops. These relieve itching, redness, and congestion. Most decongestant nasal sprays should only be used for a few days at a time to avoid worsening congestion and damage to the lining of the nose.
- **Asthma or eczema:**
  If you have asthma or eczema, keep your condition well controlled and use your prescribed preventer (steroid) inhaler or creams, especially before visiting places with animals.
- **Regular medication:**
  For more serious or frequent symptoms, your doctor may prescribe stronger antihistamines, nasal sprays for regular use, or adjust your asthma or eczema treatment.
- **Always follow instructions** on medicines and ask your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist if you're unsure what to use.

Managing serious symptoms

Asthma reviews: if you have asthma, regular reviews with your healthcare team can help reduce your risk of asthma attacks.

Adrenaline (epinephrine): if you are at higher risk of anaphylaxis (a serious allergic reaction), you may be prescribed adrenaline. Because anaphylaxis can happen very quickly, adrenaline is available in different forms that are designed to be easy to use.

Options currently available on prescription in the UK include:

- **Adrenaline auto-injectors (AAIs)** – such as EpiPen and Jext.
- **Intranasal adrenaline spray (EURneffy)** - a needle-free nasal spray.

You must carry two in-date forms of prescribed adrenaline at all times as a second dose may be needed if symptoms do not improve after five minutes or get worse.

Make sure you, your family, and friends know how and when to use your adrenaline. Ask your healthcare professional for training or use the manufacturer's training videos and devices.

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- **Emergency action:**
  If you experience any of the ABC symptoms after animal exposure, use your adrenaline and call 999 immediately.

Read more about what to do in an emergency.
Find out more about adrenaline.

Allergen immunotherapy

Allergen immunotherapy (sometimes called desensitisation) is a treatment for animal allergies that can help reduce your body's reaction to specific animal allergens, such as cat, dog, or horse dander. It is usually considered when your symptoms are serious or not well controlled by standard allergy medicines like antihistamines or nasal sprays, or where losing a much-loved pet is not an option.

Immunotherapy works by gradually introducing small but increasing amounts of the animal allergen to your immune system, helping it become less sensitive over time. This can be done in two main ways:

- **Sublingual immunotherapy (SLIT):** the most common method for animal allergies in the UK. You take drops or tablets containing the allergen under your tongue each day. After the first supervised dose it is usually done at home.
- **Subcutaneous immunotherapy (SCIT):** Less commonly used for animal allergies, this involves regular injections of the allergen under the skin, given at a hospital allergy clinic because occasional severe reactions can occur.

Immunotherapy is not a quick fix. It is usually given for three years or more, and the benefits can last for several years after treatment stops. It is generally safe, but mild side effects like mouth itching are common with SLIT. Serious reactions are very rare, especially with the under-the-tongue method.

Who can benefit?

- Immunotherapy may be suitable for people with serious or persistent allergy symptoms caused by occasional exposure to a specific animal (for example, when visiting friends or family with pets).
- It is less likely to work for people who are in daily contact with animals, such as pet owners or those who work with animals, because ongoing high exposure can make the treatment less effective.
- You will need to be assessed by an allergy specialist to see if immunotherapy is right for you, your GP can refer you to a specialist allergic clinic if necessary.

Immunotherapy is not designed to make it safe for people with severe allergies to keep the animal in their home but may reduce risks in those with milder reactions. It can help reduce symptoms during unavoidable, occasional exposure.

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Other ways to manage a pet allergy

Avoidance

If you are diagnosed with an animal allergy, you should try to avoid contact with that type of animal and places where they live. Animal fur and allergens can get everywhere because they can cling to clothes, shoes, fabrics and surfaces, which can make them hard to avoid.

If you are visiting someone with an animal that triggers your allergy, start any preventive medication in good time and carry prescribed medication with you. You can also ask them to remove the pets from the room before you arrive, but you may still react to hair, saliva or skin flakes left on carpets and furniture.

Larger animals such as horses shed dander in the form of dandruff. If you are allergic to horses you will need to avoid contact with them and with clothing, riding equipment or accessories that have been near them. If you do ride horses, change out of your riding clothes before entering the house. Place them in a sealed bag and wash them to avoid spreading any dander around your home.

If your child has animal allergies, it's important to inform their nursery or school, and any clubs they attend. You should also speak to anyone who looks after them, such as friends and family, so they know to avoid putting your child around animals.

If you have a pet you are allergic to

Pet allergens can get everywhere, as they can cling to walls, surfaces and fabrics. It may help to:

- keep windows open whenever possible
- clean rooms often – including furniture and carpets weekly
- wash bedding often
- wash hands often
- install hardwood floors instead of carpets
- use an air purifier and vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter
- wash your pet regularly, if possible, ask someone else to help
- have someone without a pet allergy brush the pet outside to remove the allergens attached to fur.
- keep your pet and cages out of bedrooms or places people sleep
- keep pets off furniture

You can now buy allergen-reducing cat food (e.g. Purina Pro Plus Livercare) that can bind to the main protein in cats that causes allergies. This can reduce the amount of protein given off by the cat and therefore can help reduce symptoms. This is unlikely to be enough to prevent serious symptoms but can be used in combination with the above strategies.

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Will I need to rehome my pet?

Some people with an animal allergy make the decision to rehome their pet, but this is a very personal and difficult decision. Before considering this step, it's important to have allergy testing to confirm the cause of your symptoms, because you may be reacting to something else in the environment, such as dust mites or pollen.

If you do decide to rehome your pet, it's worth knowing that symptoms may not improve right away. Pet allergens can remain in carpets, upholstery and dust for up to 6–9 months after the animal has left. Having your home professionally deep cleaned can help speed up this process.

Some people report that their symptoms improve over time while living with a pet. They may react more strongly to other people's animals than their own. However, in many cases, people don't become less allergic—they simply get used to living with mild but constant symptoms.

Pet allergens are very sticky and easily spread. They can travel on clothing and have even been found in schools, buses, and hotel rooms. For people with serious animal allergies, this means symptoms can occur in places where no animals are present.

How long do the pet allergy symptoms last after exposure?

Allergic symptoms will continue as long as you are exposed to the animal or its allergens. Once the allergen is removed, most people find that symptoms start to improve within a few hours, but they can sometimes last for two to three days—especially if the exposure was significant or if symptoms were serious, such as eye swelling.

Showering and changing clothes after exposure can also help speed up recovery.

Can pet allergies be prevented?

If your child already has allergies—such as food allergies, eczema, or asthma—you may wonder if it's safe to bring a cat or dog into your home.

Children who already have allergies, especially those with poorly controlled or serious eczema, are at higher risk of developing new allergies, including to animals. This is partly because a broken skin barrier in eczema can allow animal allergens to enter the body more easily, increasing the chance of becoming sensitised.

If your child has not had regular, close contact with a particular animal before, it's unlikely they are already allergic. However, allergies can develop after repeated or ongoing exposure, especially in children who are already prone to allergies. Even if allergy tests are negative now, a child may still develop an allergy after living with a pet for some time.

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To help reduce the risk of developing a pet allergy:

- Keep eczema and other allergies well controlled.
- Discuss the decision to get a pet with your doctor, especially if your child has severe eczema, asthma, or other allergies.
- Consider creating pet-free zones in your home, such as bedrooms and playrooms, to limit allergen exposure.
- Encourage good hygiene, like washing hands after touching pets and avoiding face-to-face contact.

'Hypoallergenic' dogs

Although the name suggests that 'hypoallergenic' dogs are safe for people with allergies, it's not possible to remove the risk completely. Some breeds produce more allergens than others, but all breeds of dog produce dander and saliva, so no breed can be classed as truly hypoallergenic.

While shorter-haired dogs may pose a lower risk because they produce less dander, it's still possible to have allergic reactions to them.

Therapy dogs in schools

Some schools have therapy dogs to support children. As animal allergies can sometimes lead to serious reactions, schools need to make plans for how to manage allergies safely. This is preferable to excluding therapy dogs altogether. Schools should arrange a risk assessment and take steps to reduce any risks before introducing an animal into the school.

Schools can work with parents (and the child's healthcare team when needed) to draw up individual allergy management plans before introducing an animal, and every child with an allergy should have a written allergy action plan that is shared with staff and kept on file.

Read more about our Safer Schools programme

Read our dogs in school allergy guidance

Living with a pet allergy can be stressful, especially for children who may feel left out when they can't visit their friends' houses due to the presence of animals. This restriction can impact their social life, emotional well-being, and sense of inclusion. Understanding the connection between allergies and anxiety is important, to manage both physical symptoms and emotional responses of living with serious allergies.

Read more about allergies and anxiety

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Animal allergy in people who work around animals

Animal allergy is an occupational risk for people who work with or near animals, for example vets, farmers or people who work in laboratories. In some cases, symptoms can be serious enough to need a change of career.

There have been rare cases of laboratory workers with animal allergies having a serious allergic reaction after being bitten by an animal in the lab or from needles contaminated with animal allergens. As reactions can progress quickly, your doctor may recommend carrying adrenaline if you work in a lab with animals. Co-workers should be trained in what to do in an emergency.

All animal laboratories should have risk assessments in place to lower the risk of exposure to animals for people with allergies, and to help prevent the development of animal allergy. The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) Guidance Note EH76 offers examples of avoidance measures to reduce the risks.

Personal protection equipment such as filter masks and respirators may be helpful in reducing or preventing symptoms. But because tiny amounts of allergen can sometimes trigger symptoms, this may not provide complete protection.

Key messages

- If you think you might have an animal allergy, visit your GP.
- If you have asthma, make sure it is well managed.
- If you are visiting someone with an animal that you are allergic to, start any preventive medication in good time.
- Always carry prescribed medications with you.
- If you are prescribed adrenaline, carry two doses with you at all times.

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Feedback

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Sources

All the information we produce is evidence based or follows expert opinion and is checked by our clinical and research reviewers. If you wish to know the sources we used in producing any of our information products, please contact info@anaphylaxis.org.uk and we will gladly supply details.

Reviewer

The content of this factsheet has been peer-reviewed by Professor John Warner, Professor of Paediatrics at Imperial College London.

Disclosures

We are not aware of any conflicts of interest in relation to the review of this factsheet.

Disclaimer

The information provided in this factsheet is given in good faith. Every effort is taken to ensure accuracy. All patients are different, and specific cases need specific advice. There is no substitute for good medical advice provided by a medical professional.

About Anaphylaxis UK

Anaphylaxis UK is the only UK-wide charity solely focused on supporting people at risk of serious, life-threatening allergic reactions. We provide information and support to people living with allergies through our free national helpline. We also fundraise to achieve our ultimate aim, to create a safer environment for all people at risk of serious allergies. Visit our website www.anaphylaxis.org.uk and follow us to keep up-to-date with our latest news. We're on Facebook @anaphylaxisUK, LinkedIn, Instagram @anaphylaxisUK, Twitter @AnaphylaxisUK and you can find our podcast here.

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