



FieldHaven Feline Rescue

Mission

Educating our community on responsible pet ownership while providing safe haven for cats and kittens in transition to new lives in permanent homes.

When Their Dander's Up

By Carrie Allan

Allergic relinquishers should know: research indicates giving up a pet can actually bring on allergies

"Take two cats and call me in the morning." Not a typical prescription for the allergic—but perhaps it should be.

In 1999, a study presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology indicated that kids with early exposure to pets were less likely to develop allergies in later life (see "A Pet a Day...", Animal Sheltering, Sept-Oct 2000). According to a recent article on MSNBC.com, new research takes that conclusion one step further: studies confirming the protective effect of animals against childhood pet allergies have also shown that removing a cat from a home can actually trigger the opposite response—causing a previously non-feline-allergic child to become allergic to cats.



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The likely scenario works like this: The parents of a child allergic to dust mites and pollen—but not to cat dander—get rid of their cat, either because they don't know the child's specific allergies or because they want to remove any possible sources of allergens. That child then goes on to develop cat allergies, Dr. Thomas Platts-Mills, chief of the allergy division of the University of Virginia's department of microbiology, said in the interview with MSNBC.

The new research has contributed to a current theory among allergists: exposing a child to allergens early in life will help the child build up an immunity to them, in much the same way vaccinations will. It helps explain why kids raised on farms tend to develop fewer allergies than kids brought up in "hermetically sealed apartments," Platts-Mills said. (Interestingly, researchers also noted that the protection of having a cat isn't permanent. If a kid is raised with a cat but then goes away to summer camp or college for a few months, he may be allergic to the cat when he returns, having lost that protection.)

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The new research is a happy sign for shelters—and for many allergists, who've long believed that giving up the pet was a logical step for allergy sufferers but still hated to tell a family that Mittens had to go. In a recent interview with a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing good information to mothers of asthmatic children, Platts-Mills said he no longer immediately recommends that families with a history of asthma give up their cats to protect their children; allergy testing and examination by a board-certified allergist are the only ways to determine whether the child's allergies are specifically feline-related.

Platts-Mills also suggested the following alternatives to pet surrender: Get rid of carpeting, which harbors allergens; replace cloth upholstery with alternative coverings; wash pets at least twice a week; use a HEPA air filter in the house; and cover mattresses and cushions with zippered, plastic casings to cut down on allergen build-up.

These suggestions may help you help your allergic clients. You may also want to recommend that they wash bedding regularly and use a vacuum with a filter designed specifically to trap allergens. It's worthwhile to ask relinquishers who say they're giving up a pet due to their children's allergies whether a doctor has determined that the pet is truly the source of those allergies. You can inform them of these recent studies—they may be delighted not only to keep their pets, but to help their children avoid future cat-induced sneezing fits.

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