Animal Allergy

Allergen Avoidance

Household pets are the most common source of allergic reactions to animals. 15-30% of people with allergies have an allergy to dogs, cats, or other animals. Cats are the most common cause for pet allergies and approximately 10 million people in the United States are allergic to cats. Pet allergies are caused by an immune system response to proteins present in the animal. Many people assume that they are allergic to their pet’s fur. Actually, the culprits are proteins in pet dander and dried saliva and urine. Dander occurs naturally as the epidermis, or the outer layer of skin, renews itself. The epidermis is made up of many layers of cells which are constantly pushing upward to replace the cells above. As this occurs, the outer cells die and flake off into the environment as dander. It has been found, incidentally, that the epidermal turnover is more rapid in breeds that are groomed frequently and especially in breeds that are prone to various forms of dry and oily seborrhea. Saliva and urine are also potential sources of allergens. They are deposited on the fur through licking and urination. More people are allergic to cats than dogs, probably because cats spend more time indoors and bathe themselves with their saliva. Since dander is very small and light, it can attach itself to your clothes when you are away and ride back into your home undetected. It can also come in on the clothes of your children or guests. Animal dander has been found in many public places, like school classrooms, in quantities high enough to cause an allergic reaction.

Many homes without pets have been tested, and similar results have been found. If you have moved into a home where a pet has lived, it will take a year or more for all of the dander to lose its potency. So even if you don’t have a cat in your home you can react as if there is one. Some rodents, such as guinea pigs and gerbils, have become increasingly popular as household pets. They, too, can cause allergic reactions, as can mice and rats. Urine is the major source of allergens from these animals.

Animal Allergy Myths and Realities

- **Myth:** Some breeds of animals are non-allergenic.
  - **Reality:** Since dander is produced within a cat or dog’s skin and they all have skin, there are no breeds that are non-allergenic.

- **Myth:** Male cats produce more allergen than female cats. Some breeds of dogs produce dog allergen faster than others.
  - **Reality:** Continuous exposure to animals will desensitize you to them.

- **Myth:** Allergy has little to do with the length of fur (or hair) on the animal. Even though short haired animals shed less, they still produce the same amount of dander, which is the real cause of the pet allergies.
  - **Reality:** Allergy is due to animal saliva and is deposited on the fur through licking and urination.

- **Myth:** Shorter hair animals are less allergenic.
  - **Reality:** Male cats produce more allergen than female cats. Some breeds of dogs produce dog allergen faster than others.