

Getting a New Pet: How Allergy and Asthma Sufferers Can Prep Their Homes

Getting a new pet can be exciting, but it also means new responsibilities and unforeseen challenges. You may have already thought about how to fit dog walking into your day or whether you will board your pet when you travel. What you may not have considered, though, is the impact that your new furry friend could have on your indoor air quality.

Pet dander is a common trigger for respiratory ailments such as asthma and allergies, especially when it clogs air filters. [Common symptoms](#) include headaches and nasal congestion, coughing and wheezing, sneezing, itchy or watery eyes, and even hives or a skin rash. Fortunately, there is no reason to give up the joys of pet ownership. Of course, you should always check with your doctor to determine how your medical conditions may be affected by bringing in a new pet.

With some advance planning and scrupulous HVAC maintenance, though, the majority of allergy and asthma sufferers can welcome a pet into their lives. Here is what you need to know to prep your home for your new furry friend.

What you need to know about pet allergens

Pet dander, or the tiny skin cells shed by furry or feathered pets, is a very common trigger for pet allergies. The most common [allergen producing proteins](#), Fel d 1 in cats and Can f 1 and Can f 2 in dogs, are especially prevalent in dander.

However, the [American Lung Association](#) points out that dander is not the only problem. Pet urine, feces, and saliva can also contain the proteins responsible for pet allergies. This can be a particular problem for cat owners, since cats lick themselves to stay clean. Dried saliva can then flake off and enter the air.

Unlike dust mites and other common allergens, [pet allergens tend to remain suspended](#) in the air for quite awhile, and their jagged shape easily catches on fabric or furnishings. They can spread rapidly, not only within the home, but also to anywhere you travel such as work or school.

Interestingly, though many people believe that animal fur causes allergies, this is [not actually the case](#). Fur itself is rarely allergenic. Instead, long haired pets tend to collect more dander in their fur, as well as other airborne allergens such pollen and dust. For this reason, short haired pets may be a better choice for those with allergies and asthma.

Another common misconception is that [only dogs and cats can trigger allergies](#). It is true that cats are responsible for the most allergies, followed by dogs. But any animal with fur or feathers could cause an allergic reaction. In fact, caged or stabled animals can cause additional problems, because these enclosed environments tend to become breeding grounds for bacteria, dust, and even mold.

All these problems can be worsened by poor maintenance of your HVAC system. If [your air or furnace filter becomes clogged](#), it can no longer remove contaminants from the air. That means that everyone in your home will breathe in whatever allergens and other pollutants are present.

In the short term, this could cause symptoms like dizziness, headaches, and itchy eyes. Over the long term, your family could be at higher risk for heart disease, chronic respiratory ailments, and even cancer.

Which animals pose the biggest problems, and which are the best for allergy sufferers? [Cats are present](#) in just 27 percent of American homes, while dogs live in 32 percent of homes. Yet cat allergies are reported about twice as often as dog allergies. Yet some people with allergies or asthma enjoy keeping a cat in the house.

If you are in the market for a new pet, you may be wondering which breed to choose. According to the [American Lung Association](#), there is no such thing as a completely hypoallergenic cat or dog. However, some breeds seem to be worse allergen producers than others. For the reasons detailed above, short haired or hairless breeds may be a better option, especially if you suffer from allergies to pollen or other contaminants that tend to become trapped in animal fur.

In addition, some breeds naturally produce lower levels of the allergy causing proteins. Some people, especially those with milder allergies, find that simply choosing the right pet, in conjunction with maintaining good indoor air quality, is enough to alleviate many of their symptoms.

[7 dogs for allergy sufferers](#)

- **Portuguese water dog:** You may remember that Bo, the Obama family dog, is a Portuguese water dog. The former First Family chose this breed in part due to daughter Malia's pet allergies. Portuguese water dogs are loyal, intelligent, and athletic, and are best suited to highly active families.
- **Poodle:** Whether you prefer a toy, standard, or miniature size, poodles are an active and intelligent choice. They need regular exercise and professional grooming.
- **Chinese Crested:** If you're looking for a small, gentle dog that is great with children, consider a Chinese Crested. They are playful and enjoy bonding with humans but do not require the vigorous exercise of some breeds, and they shed very little fur.
- **American hairless terrier:** This is a fun and friendly hairless breed perfect for an urban lifestyle. They're good with kids and need only regular walks and playtime. They should be bathed regularly.
- **Xoloitzcuintli:** If you want a tranquil and easygoing dog that needs moderate exercise, consider a Xoloitzcuintli. They may be hairless or coated in short, flat fur, and they come in toy, miniature, and standard sizes.
- **Giant Schnauzer:** If you have the room, a giant schnauzer can be a great addition to the family. They are territorial and protective, and are the happiest when they have a job to perform. Giant schnauzers are very smart and highly active.
- **Coton de Tulear:** These small dogs are anything but fragile. They're loyal and eager to please, and they get along well with both children and other dogs. Their long coat requires daily attention to avoid matting.

[7 cats for allergy sufferers](#)

- **Oriental short hair:** With a very short coat, these cats carry fewer trapped allergens. Frequent grooming is still important to reduce dander.
- **Sphynx:** The sphynx is a hairless cat, making it a great choice for those trying to reduce environmental allergies such as dust and pollen. Regular baths are essential to remove built-up skin oils.

- **Cornish Rex:** These cats have a warm suede feel due to a thin layer of down. They need frequent bathing to guard against oil buildups.
- **Devon Rex:** This highly affectionate cat has a thin, short coat. If your allergies are primarily to the things that get trapped in pet fur, such as pollen or mold, a Devon rex may be a great choice.
- **Javanese:** With no undercoat, the Javanese has less fur to trap dander and other allergens than many other breeds.
- **Balinese:** The Balinese produces less of the protein that causes most pet allergens. If your primary allergy is dander, you may experience fewer symptoms with this breed.
- **Siberian:** If you're allergic to pet dander but looking for a cuddly cat with a thick coat, consider a Siberian. It also produces less allergy causing protein than most breeds.

Things you can do

If you are adding a new furry friend to a home with allergy or asthma sufferers, there are steps you can take to reduce the effects of pet allergens. Always consult with your doctor for specific medical advice, but here are some general tips:

[Keep pets out of your bedroom](#)

You can reduce, though not eliminate, pet allergies by keeping animals out of your bedroom. Be aware, though, that forced-air heating and air-conditioning systems can spread allergens throughout your home, so this step is not enough on its own.

[Add an air purifier with a pet allergen filter](#)

Although it cannot remove allergens that are stuck to furniture or fabrics, an air purifier can help remove pet dander and other contaminants that are still in the air.

[Reduce fabric contamination](#)

Remove wall to wall carpeting or choose one with a very low pile and steam clean it regularly. Keep pets off furniture or use washable furniture covers. Change linens and wash throw rugs on a regular basis.

[Vacuum with a dust mask](#)

Vacuuming is a great way to remove pet dander and other allergens from carpets and upholstery. Unfortunately, it also stirs up the allergens in the process. Vacuum frequently, but always wear a dust mask when you do. Another option is a robotic vacuum with a HEPA filter—but without that filter, a robotic vacuum could do more harm than good.

Contain your pet

The more freedom your pet has to roam outdoors, the more opportunities it has to get covered in allergens. Restrict your pet to areas you know well. Indoors, try to keep the animal confined to a few rooms that are easy to clean.

Practice good pet hygiene

Clean your animal with pet wipes, and comb out any matted fur, before it comes inside. Bathe your pet regularly with an anti-dander shampoo.

Upgrade your air and furnace filters

Although they are best used in tandem with other methods for reducing allergen exposure, [upgraded air and furnace filters](#) can help minimize your symptoms. Choose filters that are specifically designed for pet dander or for allergies.

Change your filters more often

In a pet-free home, the [general rule of thumb](#) is to change your air or furnace filter every 90 days. With a single pet, though, you should change your filter every 60 days. Homes with more than one pet, or where anyone has allergies or asthma, need a filter change every 20 to 45 days.

Consider non-traditional pets

Though they aren't as cuddly or popular as cats and dogs, non-traditional pets can be just as much fun. Here are a few options that can be great choices for those with allergies or asthma:

- [Snakes or Lizards](#): Snakes and lizards come in a variety of species, sizes, and habits. Some, like iguanas, can even be trained. Whether you want a large pet or a small one, something colorful to watch or a pet that will snuggle with you, there may just be a lizard or a snake that's right for you.
- [Hermit crabs](#): Hermit crabs can be a good choice for those who want a low maintenance pet. They can be handled, but be careful not to frighten them or they may pinch.
- [Birds](#): Some people with pet allergies are also allergic to birds, so spend some time around them before you commit. If you don't show signs of an allergy, though, a bird can be an excellent option. Some birds will serenade you constantly, some can learn to talk, and some even like to cuddle. Do your research carefully, as many larger birds can live into their 50s or beyond.
- [Gerbils or Mice](#): Although these pets can still carry allergens, gerbils and mice are reasonable options for many allergy sufferers who really want a furry friend. Since they are typically confined to a cage, they will not drag allergens all over the house. Keep the cage clean and wash your hands thoroughly after handling the animal.
- [Turtles or Tortoises](#): Turtles and tortoises can make great pets for those who are content to watch more than handle. There are a variety of species, each with its own diet, habitat, and typical behaviors.

Please note that non-traditional pets have specialized needs that can be complex. Do your research to make sure you are ready and able to provide the proper habitat, temperature controls, humidity controls, diet, and other needs for the pet of your choice.

Keep an eye on your furnace

It's important to change your furnace filter and have it professionally inspected each fall before heating season. If it's time for a replacement, make sure you understand the factors that can affect the [cost of a new furnace](#).

Additional Considerations

According to the ASPCA, about 6.5 million pets enter shelters each year. While some of these are due to circumstances beyond the owners' control, such as financial or medical disasters, others could have been avoided with forethought and planning. Respiratory issues are definitely a factor that needs to be considered when thinking about whether to bring a pet into your home.

There are also increased financial costs to consider. In addition to expenses like pet food and vet care, those with allergies and asthma may face additional costs, such as:

- More frequent air and furnace filter changes
- More expensive filters
- Possibly more medications and/or doctor visits
- Upgraded vacuum cleaner
- Dust masks
- Furniture covers

If you have allergies or asthma, you may still be able to own a pet. However, it's important to be informed about the possible health concerns and financial costs that you might face. Do your research, talk to your doctor, and take active steps to prepare your home to reduce allergens. With a bit of planning and a strong commitment to making it work, many people are able to enjoy the companionship of a pet despite their allergies or asthma.