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DO YOU SNEEZE AT YOUR SIAMESE?

DALLAS--Do you sneeze at your Siamese? Do your eyes water around your Alsatian? If so, you're among the millions of Americans who have pet allergies. An estimated 15 percent of Americans have cat or dog allergies, and 20 to 30 percent of asthmatics have cat or dog allergies.

Pet allergies can have a big impact on family life, especially when parents discover that their child may be allergic to the family pet.

"Allergies to pets are not present when a child is first born," said Dr. Rebecca Gruchalla, an allergy expert and an instructor of internal medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. "Pet allergies take months or years to develop. And even if the pet is banished from the house or given away, the antigen persists for months. Eventually, after intense cleaning, it is removed."

If you suspect you have a pet allergy, she recommends seeing a board-certified allergist for an evaluation. "What you think is a pet allergy may be an allergy to dust or mold," she said.

Pet allergies not only impact family life, they also represent an occupational hazard for people like veterinarians and lab workers. Veterinarians who are allergic to cats or other animals may choose to wear masks, which help a little, or take allergy shots. Others simply wash their hands thoroughly after examining an animal. Even with precautions, the unexpected encounter can cause problems.

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Gruchalla recalls a time when her former mentor, who was allergic to mice, was bitten by one of the animals. Normally, when working with mice, he would develop nasal congestion and his eyes would itch. On this particular occasion, however, he developed very severe symptoms, including breathing problems, which required an injection of adrenalin.

One of Gruchalla's patients was extremely allergic to cats. Naturally, the patient didn't allow cats in her home, nor did she visit homes where a cat was present. Unfortunately, one of her co-workers was a cat fancier who harbored cat dander on her clothes. The patient was miserable, and eventually Gruchalla decided to give her allergy shots since the cat-loving co-worker would not give up her cats.

Gruchalla said she relies on allergy shots as a last resort for patients with pet allergies. If cats are the problem, she recommends weekly baths for the cat. Of course cats don't like baths much, but Gruchalla said the cat will eventually get used to it, especially if you start the weekly ritual when the cat is a kitten. Check with your veterinarian about the type of soap to use, if any, and use only warm water. Rather than dunking your cat, just wet the animal slowly, she suggested, and wear gloves to avoid being scratched.

When you sneeze at your cat, you are really sneezing at *Fel d1*, a protein present in a cat's skin as well as in its saliva glands. As the cat licks its fur, it deposits these proteins on its body. When the moist *Fel d1* particles dry, they are dispersed into the air and find their way into a person's nostrils. Washing the cat reduces the amount of *Fel d1* protein on the fur.

"Simply keeping the cat out of the allergic person's room will not

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help," Gruchalla said. "If the cat walks into the living room, the level of cat antigens in the air skyrockets and remains elevated awhile. Therefore, a cat-allergic person has several options: Bathe the cat; remove it from the home; take allergy shots or premedicate with nasal steroids."

While dog allergies are not as prevalent as cat allergies, they do exist. Gruchalla said a person may only be allergic to certain breeds of dogs. Unfortunately, she said, while dog-specific antigens have been identified in dog dander, there is still no evidence that washing the dog will reduce the symptoms.

In addition to cats and dogs, Gruchalla acknowledges that other pets--birds, for instance--can cause allergy symptoms.

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.