

Keeping small pets in an allergic household

If you have allergies, check with your doctor before you get a small pet.

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If anyone in your household has allergies, don't proceed any further until you've carefully analyzed the risks and benefits. Allergic diseases are disorders of the immune system characterized by abnormal sensitivity to an ordinarily harmless substance. In allergy to small pets, the invading substances are proteins in the animal's saliva, urine, sebaceous glands and dander. When airborne and inhaled, these proteins trigger coughing, wheezing and a runny nose. Symptoms range from mildly irritating to life-threatening.

The frustrating truth is that allergies tend to come in multiples. Therefore, a person who reacts adversely to pollens or dust, for example, may well develop a sensitivity to animals, too. Cats and dogs aren't the only animals that make people sneeze—any creature with hair or feathers, such as rabbits, hamsters and guinea pigs, can cause problems for an allergic individual.

The first line of defense against allergy is avoidance. With the increasing recognition of the importance of pets in people's lives, however, some physicians are taking the human-animal bond into consideration in their treatment strategies. If someone in your household has allergies, don't give up on the idea of a small pet, but do check with your doctor beforehand.