

Is It The Rabbit Or The Hay?

Are you allergic to your rabbit, the hay or something else?

By Rose Gordon

Photo Courtesy Caroline Gallina

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Experiencing itchy eyes, a runny nose or skin rashes after handling your pet rabbit? Before you run tearfully to the nearest animal shelter or adoption agency with your rabbit in tow, take some time to determine what you are actually allergic to.

“People need to be detectives,” said Dr. Susan Smith, a professor in the Department of Nutrition at the University of Wisconsin — Madison and scientific advisor and fosterer for the House Rabbit Society. People need to ask themselves, “Is it the bunny, the hay or something else in the environment,” Smith said.

Possible allergens, aside from the rabbit, include: hay, dust mites or mold in the cage, cleaning products such as aerosol sprays, or outdoor pollens. Rabbit fur can also collect dust or pollen, which can lead to the assumption that the fur is causing the allergic reaction. By investigating and using a little trial and error, you should be able to determine what you’re actually allergic to. However, if you still can’t decide, you may want to see an allergist, who will perform skin and blood tests. Knowing what you’re allergic to will help determine which preventive measures you should take.

No matter what you’re allergic to — the rabbit, mold or dust — these steps will help reduce your body’s negative reaction:

Step 1: Wash your hands, particularly after handling or feeding the rabbit, to reduce your exposure to allergens.

Step 2: Clean, clean and clean again.

Step 3: A cheap, but effective, tool is a surgical mask purchased at your local hardware store. Wear the mask while cleaning to avoid being overwhelmed by allergens.

Step 4: Circulation: A box fan will help circulate the air, or you might want to invest in a HEPA (high-efficiency particulate arresting) air purifier or central air/heating system. A HEPA filter is a high-quality filter that pulls particles from the air. The indoor air quality in most homes is very poor, said Dr. Dorothy Calebrese, an allergy specialist in California, and simply filtering in good outdoor air can make a huge difference. Just don’t forget to replace and clean filters on a regular basis.

Step 5: Keep the humidity and temperature in the home low (high humidity increases the number of allergens able to stay in the air).

Step 6: Your doctor may recommend allergy medications such as nasal sprays, antihistamines or, in extreme cases, immunotherapy (regular allergy shots).

The Hay Can Stay

If you’re allergic to hay, banishing it from the home may lessen your allergies to it, but doing so will also undermine your rabbit’s health. Hay is a vital part of a rabbit’s diet, and most rabbit vets and nutritionists will agree, rabbits need hay to maintain health. You can coexist with hay, here’s how:

Store your rabbit’s hay in a container with a tight-fitting lid. Use gloves and wear long sleeves while handling hay. Smith, who is allergic to hay, has another suggestion: “When I feed hay, I spray the handful of hay with a mist of water — just a squirt. This holds the dust down. Then, wash your hands.”

Smith suggested that feeding pelleted hay may be another option, but it is not as beneficial for a rabbit’s health as regular hay, because it contains less fiber.

Reducing Rabbit Allergens

Most experts agree that the key to keeping you — and your rabbit — allergy-free is by cleaning and thorough hand-washing. Smith recommends keeping the rabbit cage on a rug or other easy-to-clean surface, such as a plastic chair mat (available at office supply stores) or a cut piece of linoleum.



A non-carpeted floor and limited furniture in the rabbit's area will help reduce the build up of dust, said Calebrese. Steam-cleaning your rugs may be necessary if any areas in the house are carpeted (don't use chemical cleaners, just steam). Floors, shelves, tables — all surfaces — need to be mopped and dusted with a wet rag on a regular basis. Routinely rinse the litter box, or use a liner to make this job simpler. Keep a hand-held vacuum nearby to make daily vacuuming around the cage a quick and easy task.