

Gesundheit!

Environmental and medical management may allow some allergic people to still have cats.

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In 1997, Stanley Coren, PhD, a psychologist in British Columbia, Canada, published a letter to the editor of The British Medical Journal. He discovered that when adults were diagnosed with animal allergies and advised to remove pets from their homes, only one in five actually did.

"The emotional gain from companionship associated with owning a pet is clearly sufficient to offset the physical discomfort caused by continued allergic reactions," Coren said. The findings came as a surprise to many people, but perhaps not to pet lovers.

The human-animal bond is all about the mutual benefits of pets and people living together. And it is important that this bond remains beneficial for all involved.

"I have asthma and a number of allergies," said Gesine Lohr of Alameda, Calif. "The allergist at my HMO told me to get rid of my cats. I didn't want to do that and asked to have a skin pinprick test. The results were that I had low or no specific allergy to cats, and moderate to high reaction to dust and weeds." For a pet lover, this was good news.

An Acquired Tolerance?

Cats are highly allergenic to some people; however, there are some who are able to develop a tolerance to the cat allergen. This tolerance can be developed or lost depending on the individual and circumstances.

Lost tolerance is often referred to as the "Thanksgiving effect," because it is seen when people go to college or live in a cat-free environment. When they come home to visit, they are allergic to their cat.

"I know of allergists who open their offices the Friday after Thanksgiving because this is so predictable," said Thomas Platts-Mills, MD, head of the Asthma and Allergic Diseases Center at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Va.

"I moved out of the house in my 20s," said Mary Gillis, of Haverhill, Mass. "When I went back home for the holidays, I would become very sick. It reached the point where I could only stay in the house for about 20 minutes. I visited an allergist and was tested, and found I was allergic to quite a few things, but the worst allergy was to cats.