

## Gesundheit!

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

*Marty Becker, DVM, and Janice Willard, DVM*

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"One time I offered to look after my sister's cat for a night. In less than an hour, I was so sick I had to get up out of bed and leave. I drove to a nearby hotel, not even taking time to change my clothes. I could barely see out of my red swollen eyes."

Years later, Gillis went on to adopt a kitten and now lives with three cats. Researchers are not sure why some people are able to develop tolerance to cats and others are not.

If someone can lose tolerance by living in a cat-free environment, could occasional exposures to cats during that time help maintain tolerance?

"Interesting idea," said Dennis Ownby, MD, head of allergy and immunology at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta, Ga. "But we don't know how much exposure it would take."

Although it was generally believed that the presence of cats sensitized children to cat allergens, recent studies with children have found that the presence of cats in the home was related, in many cases, to a reduction of allergic responses. This reduction was found not only to cat allergies, but to other common allergens as well. But this wasn't always the case. High exposure to feline antigens appears to protect some children but is a risk factor for others, which could be due to genetics.

A study published in Lancet Journal in 2002 confirmed the protective effect of cat exposure for at-risk children in all but one situation: If the child's mother has asthma, a cat in the home actually triples the risk that a child will develop early signs of asthma by age 5. This finding suggests that the children of asthmatic mothers become more readily sensitized to the cat allergen.

"One conclusion we can draw from these studies is that if you have a pet and you are pregnant, there is no risk to keeping the cat in the household and, in fact, there might be a benefit," Ownby said. The researchers stress that acquiring a pet with the idea it might protect a child from allergies is premature until further study.

**Mild to Moderate Allergies**A cat allergen is a protein that is excreted by the cat's saliva and skin cells. It is not the hair itself, but the proteins from the saliva and skin, which are on the hair.