

Q&A: Children with animal allergies can live comfortably with pets

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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: Our young daughter has shown signs that she might be allergic to our dog. We have had our dog for eight years, and the dog seems to be fond of our daughter. Do you have any tips for how

we can safely keep our dog without sacrificing our child's health?

ANSWER: Pets are an important part of many families. In most cases, you should be able to keep your dog while keeping your daughter safe.

Allergies occur when your immune system reacts to a foreign substance. Pet allergies often are triggered by exposure to pet urine or saliva. These allergies also can be triggered by dander, the dead flakes of skin that an animal sheds. Dander is a particular problem because it is small and can remain airborne for long periods of time with even the slightest bit of air circulation. Dander collects easily in upholstered furniture and sticks to clothing.

For people with pet allergies, exposure to these allergens can lead to various symptoms. The most [common symptoms](#) include sneezing; runny nose; itchy, red or watery eyes; [nasal congestion](#); and postnasal drip. In a child, you may see frequent rubbing of the nose. For those with a history of asthma, symptoms also may include coughing, wheezing, chest tightness or shortness of breath. In some people, skin symptoms may occur in the form of itchy skin, hives or eczema.

To reduce the effects of a pet allergy, an important first step for your daughter is to encourage hand-washing after petting the dog to minimize allergen exposure to the eyes or nose. Another key component is to keep at least one place in your home dander-free. It may be best to keep the dog out of your daughter's bedroom, since it is likely that she spends at least eight hours of each day there.

In addition to implementing [environmental changes](#), you also can try nonprescription remedies. Several over-the-counter medications, such as antihistamines and nasal corticosteroids, may relieve allergy symptoms. For example, oral antihistamines ease itching, sneezing and [runny nose](#) by reducing the production of histamine, the primary mediator in an

allergic reaction. Nasal corticosteroid sprays reduce nasal swelling, sneezing and congestion. For more persistent symptoms, [prescription medications](#), such as montelukast, or Singulair, also may help.

I would encourage you to speak to your pediatrician about any specific medications or other efforts that may be valuable, given your personal family situation. If your daughter's symptoms worsen, you will want to visit with an allergist to discuss whether allergy testing and shots are needed.

Allergy shots are a form of immunotherapy that involves receiving allergens in small incremental doses. Shots are initially given weekly, and the concentration of allergen is gradually increased to a maintenance dose over three to six months. The maintenance shot is then given monthly for three to five years. Allergy shots reduce symptoms by desensitizing the body's immune system to the allergens to which one is reactive.

A combination of [allergy](#) medication and environmental changes often can help control pet allergies, making it unnecessary to remove a family pet from the home. In almost all cases, the physical and emotional benefits pets can offer children far outweigh the issues allergies might cause.

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