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The big tissue

*With allergies becoming more common, **Tom Briggs** looks at how they affect you and what can be done to ease the symptoms*

With summer almost upon us, your mind may well be consumed by dread about the impending threat of hayfever, but while you are queuing up at your local chemist to stock up on some much-needed tissues and antihistamines, spare a thought for those who suffer from a similar condition all year round.

While cats are Britain's favourite pets, they are also thought to be one of the most common causes of allergies. That said, it must be noted that the finger is all too frequently – and often unjustly – pointed at cats when allergies attack.

Before we take a closer look at allergies and the ways you can alleviate the symptoms, it is important to confirm that your feline friend is the cause before branding him the culprit. Cats are often given up by their owners if it is thought they are the cause of a sneezing fit when it is just as likely that an aerosol spray or new carpet could be the guilty party. Therefore, if you believe you may be allergic to your cat, arrange an allergy test with your GP before taking any drastic action.

What is an allergy?

We all know that the results of an allergic reaction – such as red eyes, runny nose and itching – are very annoying, but these symptoms actually occur because your immune system is over-reacting while trying to help you. When allergy sufferers come into contact with the foreign substance that aggravates them, even something as apparently benign as dust, their body reacts to it and produces excessive numbers of antibodies. Unfortunately, these antibodies attach to cells called mast cells which are triggered by contact with the foreign material to release strong chemicals, including histamine, into the body. Histamine causes inflammation which leads to the classic symptoms of an allergic reaction, hence the name of the allergy-combating drug antihistamine.

But how do allergies start? Professor Jonathan Brostoff, an expert from King's College, London and founder of the Allergy Research Foundation, thinks they could have their beginnings earlier than you might imagine. "Generally, allergies start after birth although there is some suggestion that white cells in the umbilical cord can recognise allergens which is the first stage of developing an allergy," he says. Asked why allergies seem to have become more common, he adds: "There are many theories, but some suggest that we are too clean and so the immune system is essentially 'bored' and therefore 'thinks' that allergens are invaders and reacts to them."

Allergies, as sufferers know all too well, can be hard to escape. A possible explanation for this lies in a recent discovery by environmental scientists. They have found that we all have our own 'personal cloud' of air, dust particles and allergens that we carry around with us. So it is possible to carry the causes of allergic sneezing fits into any environment we enter – even ones that would never usually contain them.

Is a cat the cause?

For those that suffer with an allergy, any one of a huge number of allergens can be the cause. Dust mites are by far the most common, but pollens, mould spores, insects, smoke, latex, metals and certain foods can all cause reactions in sensitive individuals, so immediately accusing the nearest cat is not a logical response.

Ironically, it is cats' fastidious cleanliness that may lead to the majority of allergic reactions to them in humans. People generally assume that the cat's hair is the problem, but it is not actually the hair that triggers the reaction. In the majority of cases, the trigger is a protein called 'Fel d1' which is primarily produced by sebaceous glands in a cat's skin. Fel d1 is then spread through the coat by the cat grooming itself. This protein, along with dead skin cells known as dander, easily become airborne when the cat scratches or is stroked. Once these are in the atmosphere, the symptoms usually will not be very far behind. However, all is not lost if you suffer an allergic reaction to your cat.

According to Professor Brostoff: "If a child grows up with a cat he can become tolerant of that cat, although not necessarily all cats. There is also a suggestion that children growing up with cats are less prone to other allergies." The other good news is that repeated exposure to an individual cat can ease symptoms over time in some cases. There are also plenty of means of reducing the triggers and, therefore the irritating reactions they cause.

What you can do

If you have seen your doctor and confirmed that you are allergic to cats, there are plenty of reaction-reducing measures you can take that do not mean having to give up your feline friend. Talk to your doctor about using antihistamines, such as hayfever medicine. These come in tablet or nasal spray form and help to decrease the effect of histamine in the body but may not be a suitable solution for a long-term problem.

Reducing the amount of cat allergen in your home can also help significantly. Encourage your cat to spend more time outdoors and keep some rooms, particularly bedrooms, as cat-free zones.

To reduce the problem at its source, regular brushing outside in the garden will remove some of the loose dander while keeping your cat treated for fleas and mites will stop him from scratching as much, thus releasing fewer allergens into the atmosphere. A less popular one with your moggy – namely that of wiping him with a damp cloth and frequently washing his bed – should also result in fewer emergency doses of antihistamine or nasal spray.

Carpets and soft furnishings act like magnets to allergens, so if you've always wanted laminate flooring, here's your excuse! Regular vacuuming and the installation of air filters should also witness an improvement, but because vacuuming can stir up dust and allergens, it's a good idea to stay out of a recently vacuumed room for ten minutes before returning. Failing these measures, there are several dedicated products now available for the allergy sufferer that may help – see the panel below for a few ideas.

If you suffer from allergic reactions to cats, why not consider some of the following products?

Groom away the gloom

Regularly grooming your cat can help reduce the level of airborne allergens, thus keeping irritating symptoms to a minimum. This handy kit, available for £9.99 from Driven Snow, comprises a grooming glove that reduces shedding, moistened wipes to reduce the presence of dander and an allergen-grabbing sponge. To order, phone 020 8829 4959 or visit www.drivensnow.co.uk



A breath of fresh air

Even for those not affected by allergies there is increasing evidence that the quality of the air we breathe can directly influence our health and wellbeing. The Oreck®air (rrp £189.95) has been designed to help combat indoor air pollution by using a special five-stage purification process to remove over 95 per cent of airborne particles including pet allergens and odours. It is quiet enough to use in the bedroom. For details of your nearest stockist, phone 0800 684 684 or visit www.oreck.co.uk



Settle with Petal

In tests, these products from Bio-Life have alleviated the symptoms of 90 per cent of sufferers. Used once a week, PetalCleanse (£9.95) tackles allergens at their source by removing dander and Fel d1 from your cat, while the newly-introduced AirCleanse (£11.95) removes airborne allergens. It also eliminates pollen, dust mites and mould particles in the air which can exacerbate sufferers' symptoms. To order, phone 01608 686 626 or visit www.bio-life.co.uk. For your opportunity to win a bottle of each, turn to page 38.



Put it to the test

This test – which is part of a range that also include kits for hayfever and dust mites – shows whether you have sensitivity to allergens found on the hair and skin of cats. Simple to use and as reliable as the kind of test a GP would advise, the kit provides results in around 30 minutes in the comfort of your own home. Available for £19.95 (plus P&P) from www.imutest.com. Readers of *The Cat* can save £5 on any Imutest kit by quoting 'CPLMAGDIS'.

