

Living With Allergies and Dogs

Take control of dog allergens.

Joanne Mercer

Antares sits faithfully by his human, his affection evident in every movement of eyes, head, and tail.

He has no idea that his very proximity is a mixed blessing. I was pretty sure I was allergic [to dogs] when we bought him, but the dermatologist confirmed it, says Despina Nicoloudakis, who took the Belgian Sheepdog into her Reading, Pa., home in 1998. Whenever I touch Antares, my eyes just go crazy red, watery, burning, itching. But I love him, and he gives me unconditional love in return.

A physician's verification is key in determining whether you are indeed allergic to dogs. Allergy immunologist Anne Maitland, M.D., Ph.D., of Staten Island, N.Y., explains that how human allergies manifest varies, depending upon the individual person, the breed of dog, and environmental factors. Some people wheeze, cough, even have asthma attacks, Maitland says. Although many allergists advise their patients to get rid of their dogs once allergies are confirmed, Maitland disagrees. Given my predilection to animals, I understand when people don't want to get rid of their dogs. I help my patients work within those parameters.

If you have allergic reactions but still want a canine companion, research a variety of breeds that may be good choices for your situation. No such thing as a hypoallergenic dog exists; however, the American Kennel Club Web site (www.akc.org) lists several breeds that tend to be better than others for people with allergies. Most of the following breeds shed less because they have only a single layer of hair: Basenji, Bedlington Terrier, Bichon Frise, Chinese Crested, Irish Water Spaniel, Italian Greyhound, Kerry Blue Terrier, Maltese, Poodle, Portuguese Water Dog, Schnauzer, Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier, and Xoloitzcuintli.

While these breeds vary widely in size, coat, and character traits, they do share one common characteristic: They require regular grooming time, year-round. Jeffrey Cohen, DVM and American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine diplomate, of Newport Beach Veterinary Hospital in Newport Beach, Calif., recommends treating your dog to a warm tub bath to help reduce allergy-triggering proteins in the dog's coat. Once he realizes you're not splashing him with a cold hose, he'll probably learn to enjoy himself, Cohen affirms. Bathe him twice a week. Use conditioners and moisturizers to keep the flaking and dander down.

Doggie clothing acts as another way to keep your dog's allergens under control. Put clothes on your dog, like T-shirts and sweaters, Cohen suggests. It protects his skin from the elements and helps him shed less frequently.