

Ease the Wheezing

Take control of doggie 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 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., 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 website (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, 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.”

Nicoloudakis has her non-allergic children brush Antares’ thick coat weekly (he loves the attention). Not all owners, however, have non-allergic family members. “If you are allergic [and groom your dog yourself], take a shower after bathing your dog,” says allergy immunologist Carl Lehman, M.D. “Put your clothes right into the wash. Don’t toss them on the bed or the hamper, where allergens can stick to your bedding or other clothes. If you are asthmatic, wear a mask while bathing your dog.”

Additionally, take a look at your dog’s diet. According to Gary Buehler, DVM, “A high-quality diet may produce a healthier coat that sheds less frequently.”

Allergy sufferer Tina Durham is extremely happy with Connor and field champion Lucky Lindy, her 8-year-old Basenjis. “They require little grooming, and I can share my house, my bed, and my life with them,” Durham says. “This is the first breed of dog I’ve been able to keep indoors, and I love it!” Inside, Durham replaced carpets with linoleum or ceramic tiles, which retain fewer allergens and less dust than carpet. “Outdoors, the landscaping is low-allergy, with no grass or pollen to stick to the dog’s coats,” Durham says, providing another smart environmental strategy for dog owners with allergies.

Regardless of the breed you own, keeping your living environment clean improves your chances for a successful canine relationship. Allergy immunologist Miguel Camara, MD, urges owners to limit their dogs’ access to one specific area of the house and exclude them from the bedroom and the bed.

In addition, “use HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filter room air cleaners,” Camara says. “They remove close to 100 percent of small allergenic particles. Place filters on your furnace and air ducts. Vacuum daily. Use a double-lined vacuum bag. Wipe down your walls. Replace upholstered furniture with non-fabric sofas and chairs.” Buehler advises, “Open

windows every day, to circulate the air.”

Your dog needs you as much as you need him, however, and cuddle time is key — with one caveat. “After you pet him, be sure to wash your hands before touching your eyes or face,” Buehler says.

With a thoughtful breed choice, regular grooming, and strategies to control allergens in your home, you may just find that being allergic to dogs doesn’t mean an end to canine companionship.

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