

Oh, Baby! Can Cats Prevent Asthma in Young Children?

By Shelley Thayer
Executive Director
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According to medical statistics, the incidence of asthma is steadily increasing, with the number of people suffering with this serious condition actually doubling between 1982 and 1992.

The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America reports that an estimated 15 million Americans have asthma, including nearly five million children under the age of 18.



Cats are loving and affectionate pets, but cat dander (skin scales or flakes from fur), their saliva or their urine can spark allergy attacks and even lead to the development of asthmatic symptoms.

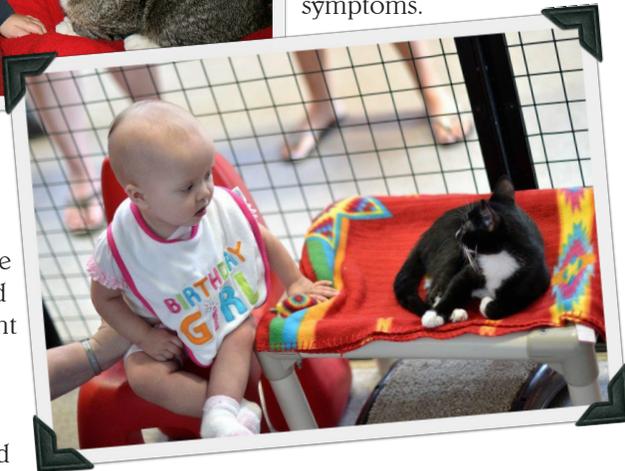
New studies, however, are shedding light and hope regarding cats and asthma, and that's good news for pet owners and their babies.

Allergy researcher Matt Perzanowski has revealed that cats may actually protect some kids from getting sick. This paradoxical finding indicates that in some cases, allergen exposure over a long period of time at a young age can actually prevent or shield against asthma symptoms. Being

allergic to a cat was a strong risk factor for having asthma, and children who grew up with cats in their households were less likely to develop asthma, Perzanowski reports.

The discovery was made as a result of Perzanowski's research into the rapidly rising number of asthma cases around the globe. The disease has reached epidemic proportions in the United States, and, according to Perzanowski, asthma is widespread, affecting one in every four adults and one in every three kids, so a large percentage of children develop asthmatic symptoms early in life.

Perzanowski and his colleagues at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health studied a group of children living in New York City. They found that by age five, kids who grew up around high levels of cat allergens were far less likely to show allergy or asthma symptoms.



"People with cats at home are exposed to especially high levels of cat allergen, probably to the order of a hundred times greater than homes without cats," Perzanowski says.

The higher level of exposure may be what's causing the protective effect shown in children who have lived with a cat from birth to age five.



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Perhaps this theory is similar to the "Hygiene Hypothesis," which suggests that exposure to bacterial and viral agents can actually benefit the immune system, giving it time to respond to pathogens and build up immunities. There was, however, no data to indicate whether the effect would continue past the early childhood years.

A study in *Allergy and Asthma Proceedings* titled, "Effect of Cat and Day Care Exposures on the Risk of Asthma in Children with Atopic Dermatitis" came to a similar conclusion regarding the relationship between exposure of children to cats in day care.

Finally, Perzanowski warns that buying a cat is no guarantee against asthma, but if you own a cat and have a baby on the way, it's possible that your pet could keep your child asthma free. And, that's good news for everyone. 🐾

Photo, far left: A local toddler visits Cat Depot for some one-on-one time with one of the cats in residence. At center: Melanie Atkins celebrates her birthday with a feline friend at Cat Depot. Photos by Corey Roscoe

Dedicated to saving lives, Cat Depot, a nonprofit 501(c)3 free-roaming facility, is recognized for its progressive design and commitment to helping homeless, abandoned and injured animals. Open seven days a week, Cat Depot is located at 2542 17th Street in Sarasota. For more information, call 941-366-2404, or visit Cat Depot online at www.CatDepot.org.

