

LaPerms and Allergies

Some people become interested in LaPerms because they suffer from allergies to cats, but want to be able to find a cat they can live with. Many, but not all, of these people find that they can live happily with a LaPerm because of its hypoallergenic qualities.

Hypoallergenic

It is important to be clear about what is meant when people refer to the LaPerm as a hypoallergenic cat. There is a significant difference between a hypoallergenic cat and a non-allergenic cat. A non-allergenic cat is one which causes no allergic reactions and sadly no such creature exists! Hypoallergenic means lesser allergy causing, so a hypoallergenic cat is one which provokes lower levels of allergic responses in those people who are unlucky enough to suffer from them. Some people have a liveable level of allergies and are happy to trade off a sneeze here or there for the pleasure of cat ownership, while others have a trigger point and will only have allergic reactions when the allergens (or allergy causing particles) reach a certain level.

The hypoallergenic qualities of the LaPerm coat are also shared with other rex breeds of cat, such as the Devon Rex and the Cornish Rex. The Shorthaired LaPerm is more hypoallergenic than the Longhaired variety, but both can be suitable for allergy sufferers. In all of these cats the volume of the coat is somewhat reduced in comparison to normal coats and the curled coat also sheds very minimally.

How allergies work

There is not only one form of cat allergy and people can have allergies to one or more of the proteins produced by a cat's body. Some people are allergic to cat hair, some to skin flakes or dander, but the overwhelmingly vast majority of people with cat allergies are actually allergic to a protein called Fel d1, which is found in cat saliva. If you sneeze or wheeze in the company of cats this is probably the cause. The protein only becomes allergenic when the saliva dries and the tiny particles left behind are dislodged and become airborne. If they are breathed in then our bodies' natural defences in our immune systems can incorrectly identify them as harmful. Histamine is produced in our respiratory system to combat the imagined invaders causing the linings of our noses to swell or itch. People also get itchy eyes or restricted airways which can cause breathlessness or wheezing.

Some people's bodies are capable of adjusting to the presence of a cat and their allergic responses will tail off given time. Some people will notice that they have this quality of they have lived happily with cats for a long time and then have a period of time without one. When they come back into contact with a cat they may be surprised to have an allergic reaction. This is not uncommon in teenagers returning home after their first term at university who find that their childhood pet is making them sneeze. However, people with this sort of reaction can normally readjust, especially if they take certain steps, although some people who become desensitised to their own cats may still have allergic reactions to other cats.

Rex Coats

The reason that Rex cats, such as the LaPerm, are hypoallergenic is that they have less coat and shed less. Also their curly coats mean that they do not shed in the same way because the curls retain shed hair and it does not drop randomly as the cats go about their business. Instead loose hair tends to come out of the coat and be discarded when the cat is groomed, or grooms itself. When a cat licks itself it deposits all of the allergenic particles on its coat. A small amount of coat

only gives a small area for the particles to be deposited on, while a cat with a voluminous coat can be covered in many more allergens. The volume of the coat corresponds to the amount of allergens that are produced as the coat is like a sponge soaking up the allergens as the cat self-grooms and then dripping them out all over the place as the cat moves about. A small sponge can only hold a little bit of water and a reduced coat will give off less allergens than a big shaggy one.

As a cat sheds hair it deposits more allergens around your home because the loose hairs which drop from its coat will have particles of allergen on them. The low shedding of Rex type coats helps to limit the amount of allergens distributed in the home. It has also been theorised that the less uniform surface structure of the individual hairs in a rex coat are less prone to releasing the allergens into the environment or the air.

Allergen Avoidance

People with mild allergies can take certain steps to make life easier with cats in the house. Allergies will not be as bad if the allergen particles which cause them are reduced. One of the best ways to improve the situation is to keep the bedroom as a cat free zone because allergies are more likely to be bad first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and will be more bothersome if they stop you from breathing well when you want to sleep.

If the air in your house contains allergens then good ventilation will bring in fresh air and dilute them, so do open windows and you will breathe more easily. Air purifiers can also be purchased with use HEPA filtration to remove the small particles. Some vacuum cleaners also contained HEPA filters and frequent vacuum cleaning, especially with a machine designed for pet owners will help remove many allergens from the carpets. It is also a good idea for allergy sufferers to regularly vacuum soft furnishings such as sofas and curtains.

Allergens are either transferred via the air or via direct contact so if you cuddle or stroke your cat then do not go on to rub your eyes or nose if you think it will trigger a reaction. Washing your hands after stroking your cat will remove the allergens.

Wooden floors and leather sofas are easier to keep clean and allergen free, so may be a more comfortable and stylish option as soft furnishings can attract the particles. Regularly washing covers and cushions will also help, especially if your cats like to sleep in different places. However, encouraging your cat to sleep in their own bed will help to limit or concentrate the allergens to that area and the bed can then be regularly washed. If cats prefer to sleep on sofas or arm chairs then providing their own washable blanket or cushions will also help.

There are some good products that are very useful; household sprays, such as Febreze Allergen Reducer, can be sprayed onto soft furnishings to prevent the allergens from becoming airborne. There are also several wet wipes or lotions that can be applied to a cat's coat, such as Petal Cleanse, which trap the allergens and work in a similar way, reducing the levels of allergens significantly.

Allergic pet owners should also make use of antihistamines from time to time, particularly if they feel that are having a bad day, or if other forms of allergy, such as hay fever, are exacerbating them. There are many excellent, cheap, non-drowsy antihistamine tablets and nasal sprays available over the counter. Many owners might not want to take them every day, but if they are only needed from time to time they are another good tool in the armoury against allergies.

Finally scientists have shown that neutering helps to reduce the amount of allergens shed by a cat, particularly when it comes to males.

If you are an allergy sufferer and are considering having a LaPerm as a pet then do discuss this with the breeders you contact. You should be clear about what would happen if you found yourself unable to live with the kitten. You should also consider visiting LaPerm-only, or Rex-only households to see how you react.

Cat allergies do not always mean that cat lovers have to live in frustration, choosing a hypoallergenic breed, such as the LaPerm, making sensible plans and taking the correct precautions could allow many happy years of cat ownership.