

By Morieka Johnson

April showers bring May flowers, along with a season of sniffing, sneezing and other allergy symptoms for people and pets. While most of us can reach for the medicine cabinet, it's a little harder to find allergy relief when you lack opposable thumbs.

So what's an itchy cat to do?

Our experts offer a few tips to help your beloved cats and kitties survive allergy season without a scratch.

Monitor the pollen count: Dr. Drew Weigner, a board-certified feline veterinary specialist and owner of [The Cat Doctor](#) in Atlanta, does notice more clients seeking relief for their feline friends when the high pollen count rises. But he adds that very few cats actually suffer from seasonal allergies; they simply sneeze more due to physical irritation from pollen. If you notice excessive sneezing, monitor the [allergy forecast](#) in your area and keep cats inside when pollen piles up.

Reduce the amount of pollen tracked into the home by removing shoes or using a thick welcome mat at the entrance.

Look for allergy symptoms: If your cat does suffer from allergies, it won't be much of a secret. Dr. Weigner said that itchy cats typically get skin conditions due to the release of an immunoglobulin called IgE found in certain types of cells that are more common in cats' skin. As a result, Dr. William Carlson of [InTown](#) Animal Hospital in Atlanta said cats with allergies typically show signs of hair loss, as well as scabs or open sores.

He added that discharge in the ears or excessive scratching also are common symptoms.

Don't raid the medicine cabinet: Resist the urge to sneak a few Benadryl capsules into your cat's kibble. While certain antihistamines may be used to treat cats with allergic skin disease, Dr. Carlson said pet owners should never give a cat medication without first consulting a veterinarian.

"Each patient is different and medications are determined on an individual basis based on a physical exam," Dr. Weigner added. If your cat has serious allergy symptoms, call your vet. Better off safe than sorry.

Topical solutions provide limited relief: First you have to get a cat into the tub. Once you master *that* hurdle, Dr. Carlson said soap-free shampoos and cool water can help relieve allergy symptoms.

Cures can be costly: Regular steroid injections are considered a safe and effective way to relieve cats with allergies, said Dr. Weigner, adding that potentially serious side effects make this option the least desirable form of treatment.

Cats with extreme allergy symptoms typically get referred to a veterinary dermatologist. Determining the root cause of skin allergies requires a process of elimination using a blood test or an [intradermal skin test](#), during which possible allergens such as mold or pollen are injected under a cat's skin. Once an allergen has been detected, your veterinarian can determine a treatment plan. It sounds painful, but this test involves sedation and lasts only a few hours.

"Most veterinary dermatologists recommend hyposensitization therapy ("allergy

shots”) that attempt to desensitize the cat to specific allergens,” said Dr. Weigner. “This requires quite as commitment as the injections are given frequently and can take up to 2 years to become effective, if ever.”

Veterinarians may prescribe a potent oral medication called Atopica, a potent immunosuppressive agent. “It works by suppressing helper T-cells and thus reducing inflammation,” Dr. Corson said. “It has clinically been shown to be safe and very effective.”

Dr. Weigner also has found success with cyclosporine, a drug with few side effects and a pretty hefty price tag.

“Because it is quite expensive and there are few studies regarding its use,” he said, “it is considered a last resort and usually only used by specialists.”

Avoid unwanted stress and vet bills by reviewing all options with your veterinarian before deciding on a course of action. Intradermal tests can cost hundreds of dollars, along with fees for sedation, allergy shots or medication and follow-up care. Skin allergy treatment ranked 7th last year among cat insurance claims submitted to [VPI](#), the largest pet insurance company in the country.

Maintain monthly flea and tick treatment: While pollen can be a pain, Dr. Corson said that exposure to flea saliva is the No. 1 cause for allergic reactions in cats. Consider spring and summer prime biting season for fleas, and take action. He suggests applying topical (“spot-on”) flea [treatments](#) such as Advantage. The products contain chemical pesticides that attack pesky parasites’ central nervous system. Combing your cat frequently and treating your home for fleas on a regular basis also help, Dr. Corson said.

Reports of adverse reactions from topical flea solutions have caused the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) to pursue more stringent testing and evaluation requirements as well as stronger warning labels. If you prefer a more natural option, Victoria Park of [Park Pet Supply](#) in Atlanta suggests Natural Chemistry's DeFlea products, which uses a surfactant (“detergent”) to dissolve fleas’ waxy protective coating.

To truly take the green route, Park also recommends essential oils or diatomaceous earth — a mineral-based pesticide that comes from fossilized water plants.

Natural remedies can provide limited relief: Dr. Corson recommends Omega-3 fatty acid supplements to keep the normal immune barrier of the skin healthy and reduce secondary infections that may follow the initial allergy.

Of course, cats won’t mind if you administer omega-3 in the form of coldwater fish such as salmon, trout, and sardines. Gotta keep the cats happy!