

Paws for Pets

Caring for Your Pets When You're Ill

When you lose much of your strength or mobility, simple tasks like walking a dog or cleaning a cat's litter box can seem overwhelming. And if your immune system is weakened by HIV/AIDS, cancer, kidney or liver disease, old age, or pregnancy, you must take extra precautions to avoid disease-causing agents that any human or animal—including pets—can transmit.

Yet living with an illness or immunocompromising condition doesn't mean you have to live without your beloved pet. And, in most cases, you need not give up your pet. After all, research indicates that companion animals enhance immune functioning by decreasing stress levels and increasing levels of self confidence and self esteem. Pets provide us with a source of affection, support, and acceptance; enable us to feel needed and valued; and ease the pain, sorrow, and loneliness often experienced during illness.

That's why, for someone with a serious medical condition, the psychological and physical benefits of pet caregiving usually outweigh the risk of acquiring an illness from the pet—provided that proper precautions are followed.

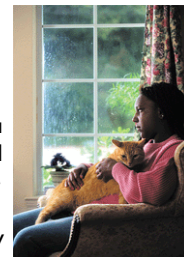
How could pets increase my risk?

Although pets can do wonders for our physical and mental well being, they can get and transmit disease. To minimize the risk your pet poses to your health, you must minimize the risks to your pet's health. The key is to understand how best to care for your pet and to work with your veterinarian to keep your pet healthy.

Certain pets are more challenging than others. For example, many exotic animals, such as reptiles, are more likely than dogs and cats to transmit certain diseases, requiring owners to take extra precautions. (The HSUS, in fact, recommends that exotic animals *not* be kept as pets.) Likewise, puppies and kittens may be more susceptible to disease and prone to play-oriented nipping and scratching. And new pets may come with incomplete or unknown medical histories. This does not mean that you have to give up your playful puppy or can't get a new pet. It simply means that you need to rely on a veterinarian or animal shelter adoption counselor to advise you on appropriate pet selection and care.

No pet is guaranteed to be or

remain disease-free. But your veterinarian can suggest preventive guidelines to keep a pet healthy, test your pet for parasites and other problems, and provide medical care to help a sick pet recover. And you can minimize risks for you and your pet by keeping your animal indoors, making sure he's well fed and groomed, and taking him to the veterinarian for vaccinations and annual check-ups.



What can I do to protect myself?

If you have a compromised immune system, follow these precautions:

- Wash your hands after handling a pet.
- Wear rubber gloves when changing a litter box or cleaning up after a pet, and wash your hands afterwards.
- Keep your pet's nails short to minimize scratches.
- Follow your veterinarian's advice on keeping your pet free of fleas and ticks.
- Keep your pet indoors and use a leash outdoors to prevent your pet from hunting, scavenging, fighting, and engaging in other activities that expose him to other animals and disease.
- Feed your pet commercial pet food.
- Keep your pet's living and feeding areas clean.
- Keep your pet's vaccinations up to date.
- Seek veterinary care immediately for a sick pet.

What can I do to meet my pet's basic needs?

If your condition makes everyday pet care too challenging, you'll need to find outside assistance to make sure your pet gets the food, grooming, exercise, and general care he needs. When relatives, friends, and neighbors can't help, a nonprofit pet assistance organization may be able to lend a hand. Typically, these organizations help HIV-infected pet owners by providing everything from emergency foster care and animal transportation to dog walking, pet grooming, and litter box cleaning services.

If you can use this assistance, ask local veterinarians, animal shelters, physicians, health care clinics, social service agencies, veterinary schools, and libraries to refer you to resources in your community.

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Introducing Your Pet and New Baby

Congratulations, you're expecting a baby! If your family already includes a pet, you'll need to help that first "baby" adjust to the new one you'll soon bring home. You can help your pet cope with this big change in much the same way parents help children understand that a new brother or sister will be joining the family. By following the tips below, you can ease your pet's stress, help her welcome your new baby, and ensure that your pet stays where she belongs—with you and your growing family.

Can I Keep My Cat?

If you're pregnant, you've probably heard of toxoplasmosis because it can cause serious birth defects. However, toxoplasmosis is a rare disease in the United States and is one that can easily be avoided. While the disease-causing parasite can be found in the feces of cats who ingest raw meat, birds, mice, or contaminated soil, toxoplasmosis is more commonly found in uncooked or undercooked meat.

If you're concerned about a possible exposure, ask your obstetrician to perform a simple blood test. If the result shows you were exposed to toxoplasmosis during pregnancy, you may be given medication and your baby may be tested and treated soon after birth. Keep in mind that the odds of contracting toxoplasmosis during pregnancy are extremely low, and even lower for your baby. Being pregnant does not mean you have to give up living with and caring for your beloved cat. Toxoplasmosis is easily avoided by practicing good hygiene and responsible pet care. Just follow these simple steps to reduce the risk:

- Avoid handling or eating uncooked meat.
- Be certain to wash all cutting boards and utensils that may have come in contact with meat before using them to prepare other foods.
- Keep your cat safely indoors and away from wildlife.
- Have someone else clean the litter box daily.
- If you must clean the litter box, wear rubber gloves and thoroughly wash your hands afterward.
- Feed cats only commercially prepared cat food.

How Will My Pet React?

No matter how much you plan ahead, the addition of a new family member may be difficult for your pet. Remember, your dog or cat was your first "baby" and is used to being the center of your attention. So it's understandable that she may experience something akin to sibling rivalry when you introduce a new human baby into your household.

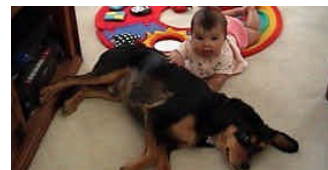
You can minimize this feeling by working with her *before* you bring home your baby. For example, because your new baby will demand a lot of your time and energy, gradually accustom your pet to spending less time with you. Drastically de-

creasing attention and frequently scolding, ignoring, or isolating your pet *after* the baby comes home will likely make your pet feel stressed. If your pet is particularly attached to the mother-to-be, another family member should develop a closer relationship with the animal. That way, the pet can still feel loved and provided for while mom is busy with the baby.

How Can I Prepare My Pet?

Below are several suggestions to make introducing your pet and baby safer and smoother for all. Be sure to carry out these changes months before the baby's arrival to best prepare your pet.

- Take your pet to the veterinarian for a routine health exam and necessary vaccinations.
- Spay or neuter your pet. Not only do sterilized pets typically have fewer health problems associated with their reproductive systems, but they are also calmer and less likely to bite.
- Consult with a veterinarian and pediatrician if the thought of your newborn interacting with the family pet makes you uncomfortable. By working with these experts before your baby is born, you can resolve problems early and put your mind at ease.
- Address any pet training and behavior problems. If your pet exhibits fear and anxiety, now is the time to get help from an animal behavior specialist.
- If your pet's behavior includes gentle nibbling, pouncing, or swatting at you and others, redirect that behavior to appropriate objects.
- Get your pet used to nail trims.
- Train your pet to remain calmly on the floor beside you until you invite him on your lap, which will soon cradle a newborn.
- Consider enrolling in a training class with your dog, and practice training techniques. Training allows you to safely and humanely control your dog's behavior and enhances the bond between you and your pet.
- Encourage friends with infants to visit your home to accustom your pet to babies. Supervise all pet and infant interactions.



Introducing Your Pet and New Baby (cont.)

- Use a baby doll to help your pet get used to the real thing. Carry around a swaddled baby doll, take the doll in the stroller when you walk your dog, and use the doll to get your pet used to routine baby activities, such as bathing and diaper changing.
- Talk to your pet about the baby, using the baby's name if you've selected one.
- Sprinkle baby powder or baby oil on your skin so your pet becomes familiar with the new smells.

Finally, plan ahead to make sure your pet gets proper care while you're at the birthing center.

What Do We Do After Baby Is Born?

Welcoming a new baby is exciting for your family. Remember when you first brought home your dog or cat? But before you bring your baby home from the hospital, have your partner or friend take home something with the baby's scent (such as a blanket) for your pet to investigate.

When you return from the hospital, your pet may be eager to greet you and receive your attention. Have someone else take

the baby into another room while you give your pet a warm, but calm, welcome. Keep some treats handy so you can distract your pet.

After the initial greeting, you can bring your pet with you to sit next to the baby; reward your pet with treats for appropriate behavior. Remember, you want your pet to view associating with the baby as a positive experience. To prevent anxiety or injury, never force your pet to get near the baby, and always supervise any interaction.

Life will no doubt be hectic caring for your new baby, but try to maintain regular routines as much as possible to help your pet adjust. And be sure to spend one-on-one quality time with your pet each day—it may help relax you, too. With proper training, supervision, and adjustments, you, your new baby, and your pet should be able to live together safely and happily as one (now larger) family.

Allergies To Pets

Being a pet owner is never easy. While pets bring us joy and companionship on a daily basis, they also require training, veterinary care, time, love, attention, and even tolerance. Tolerance is especially necessary when a pet owner is allergic to his or her companion animal.

Studies show that approximately 15% of the population is allergic to dogs or cats. An estimated one-third of Americans who are allergic to cats (about two million people) live with at least one cat in their household anyway. In a study of 341 adults who were allergic to cats or dogs and had been advised by their physicians to give up their pets, only one out of five did. What's more, 122 of them obtained another pet after a previous one had died. It's clear the benefits of pet companionship outweigh the drawbacks of pet allergies for many owners. Living comfortably with a companion animal despite being allergic to him requires a good understanding of the allergic condition and an adherence to a few rules.

All cats and dogs are allergenic (allergy-causing) to people who are allergic to animals. Cats tend to be more allergenic than dogs for allergic people, although some people are more sensitive to dogs than cats. Contrary to popular belief, there are no "non-allergenic" breeds of dogs or cats; even hairless breeds may be highly allergenic.

Dogs with soft, constantly-growing hair—the Poodle or the Bichon Frise, for example—may be less irritating to some indi-

viduals, although this may be because they are bathed and groomed more frequently. One dog or cat of a particular breed may be more irritating to an individual allergy sufferer than another animal of that same breed.

The source of irritation to pet-allergic humans? Glands in the animal's skin secrete tiny allergy-triggering proteins, called allergens, that linger in the animal's fur but also float easily in the air. Allergens are present in the animal's saliva and urine, too, and may become airborne when saliva dries on the fur. The severity of reaction to these allergens varies from one person to the next, ranging from mild sniffing and sneezing to life-threatening asthma, and can be complicated by simultaneous allergies to other irritants in the environment.

If you or a family member's allergies are simply miserable, but not life-threatening, take these steps to reduce the symptoms:

- Create an "allergy free" zone in the home—preferably the bedroom—and strictly prohibit the pet's access to it.



Allergies to Pets (continued)

- washing articles such as couch covers and pillows, curtains, and pet beds. Use a "microfilter" bag in the vacuum cleaner to effectively catch all the allergens.
- Bathing your pet on a weekly basis can reduce the level of allergens on fur by as much as 84%. Although products are available that claim to reduce pet allergens when sprayed on the animal's fur, studies show they are less effective than a weekly bath. Even cats can become accustomed to being bathed; check with your veterinarian's staff or a good book on pet care for directions about how to do this properly, and use whatever shampoo your veterinarian recommends.
- Don't be quick to blame the family pet for allergies. Ask your allergist to specifically test for allergies to pet dander, rather than making an assumption. And understand that allergies are cumulative. Many allergy sufferers are sensitive to more than one allergen. So if you're allergic to dust, insecticides, pollen, cigarette smoke, and cat dander, you'll need to reduce the overall allergen level in your environment by concentrating on all of the causes, not just the pet allergy. For example, you may need to step up measures to remove cat dander from your home and carefully avoid cigarette smoke during spring, when it is difficult to avoid exposure to pollen.
- Immunotherapy (allergy shots) can improve symptoms but cannot eliminate them entirely. They work by gradually desensitizing a person's im-

mune system to the pet allergens. Allergy-causing proteins are injected under the person's skin, triggering the body to produce dust and dander, antibodies (protective proteins) which block the pet allergen from causing a reaction. Patients are usually given one dose per week for a few weeks to months (depending on the severity of the allergy) and then can often manage with one injection per month.

- Additional treatments for allergies to pets are symptomatic, including steroidal and antihistamine nose sprays and antihistamine pills. For asthma, there are multiple medications, sprays, and inhalers available. It is important to find an allergist who understands your commitment to living with your pet. A combination of approaches—medical control of symptoms, good housecleaning methods, and immunotherapy—is most likely to succeed in allowing an allergic person to live with pets.

Of course, if you do not currently have a pet and are considering one, and know you are pet-allergic, be sure to consider carefully whether you can live with the allergy before you bring a new pet home. Except in the case of children, who sometimes outgrow allergies, few allergy sufferers become accustomed to pets to whom they are allergic. Too many allergic owners obtain pets without thinking through the difficulties of living with them. And too often, they end up relinquishing pets, a decision that is difficult for the owner and can be life-threatening for the pet.