Allergy-inducing cats shouldn't sleep on beds. But who's telling?

LAURIE HAAG

CAT SCRATCH FEVER

Living with pets and allergies

BY NICOLE FANCHER

It took Ashley Middleton almost one year after a car hit her beloved kitty before she and her husband considered getting another cat. But nearing Christmas of 2006, the couple felt the time had come. At Greenhill Humane Society, they fell for a bluish-grey longhaired cat with gold eyes. While they waited for Greenhill to evaluate adoption paperwork, Middleton — a Great Clips hairstylist — and her husband, Jay, talked about cat names over beers. Middleton sipped a Naughty Nellie.

It was the perfect name for the new, feisty fluffball the Middletons brought home. Nellie fit right in: She was spunky and sociable. She played with the dog, Boo (and swatted his snout if he crowded her), and she soon found her favorite spot on the couple's bed at night. But in the nighttime, Middleton started having problems breathing.

"I would lie down to go to sleep and I would start sneezing and my throat would close up," she says. After a few weeks of her suffering with puffy eyes and asthmatic symptoms, her husband suggested she might be allergic to Nellie. "No way!" Middleton remembers saying to him. "That couldn't be it." After all, she grew up with cats.

But allergies to animals are highly individual and variable and can come and go during a person's lifetime, say allergists. Children can outgrow allergies or be misdiagnosed as "prone to colds," but adults can develop allergies at any time.

About 15 percent of Americans, or 10 million people, are allergic to their pets, according to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology. So what is it about our cuddly companions that make some people itch and sneeze and wheeze?

The notorious culprit dander, or sloughed-off dead skin cells, is often to blame. But the most intense allergic reactions result from glycoproteins secreted by glands in animals' skin. The most potent such protein is Fel d1 — short for *felis domesticus* — and is produced exclusively by cats.

Dr. Patricia Ashley of Eugene's Veterinary Allergy and Dermatology clinic says it's no wonder cats often incite the most severe allergic reactions — they groom themselves all day long. Cats disperse more dander and protein allergen than dogs or other furry critters. Fel d1 is extremely pervasive: It can become airborne, it can persist for years embedded in carpet and furniture and it is even detected in catless homes from tracked-in allergen.

Still, many allergic pet owners would rather suffer through sniffles than give up their animals. The website for the Humane Society of the United States says, "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."

For Middleton, the sneezing and itching and asthma were becoming unbearable. Her husband persuaded her to see an allergist. At the clinic, the doctor administered a prick-test, poking her forearm at eight different points to test for several allergies. Minutes later, sure enough, Middleton began itching furiously and was horrified to find an enormous red welt on her arm, along with a smaller welt. The verdict: Middleton tested highly allergic to cats and dust mites. She couldn't believe it.

"I was afraid I would have to get rid of Nellie."

Instead, the allergist suggested the couple banish animals from the bedroom. In addition, they washed their bed sheets in hot water and covered their pillows and mattress in special vinyl encasements designed to block dust mites and dander. But they soon had a new problem: Feeling jilted after getting the boot, Nellie went somewhat berserk, scratching the door at night, racing around the house in a spastic rampage. "She was like a child acting out," Middleton says. The cat needed affection, Middleton told her husband. Besides, she couldn't bear the woeful meowing and dog whining at night any longer. The animals came back in, and so did Middleton's allergies.

She turned to medication. Her allergist started her with Singulair to address her aggravated asthma. But after little improvement, she added a daily Claritin. And that seemed to do the trick. Now Middleton can cuddle Nellie without fearing an allergy attack.

Many allergic pet-owners medicate with the same antihistamines used to alleviate common pollen allergies and hay fever. There are also homeopathic medications such as BioAllers, which claims to actually help boost the body's natural defense system long-term instead of merely suppressing allergy symptoms. Allergen injections are another option, where allergists essentially concoct a vaccine using animal allergen from the sufferer's own pet.

Pet websites encourage allergic pet owners to make their homes less susceptible to dander collection. The Humane Society's website and About.com "Cat" section provide suggestions such as using HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) air purifiers, HEPA vacuum cleaners, replacing carpeted areas with wood or tile and replacing curtains with vinyl blinds. There are also some low-cost, no-brainer solutions: Wash sheets, comforters, etc. with hot water (140 degrees F), bathe and brush your pets regularly to minimize loose dander and designate pet-free rooms. The emphatic overall message: You don't have to get rid of your pets.

But in recent years, many prospective pet buyers have chosen another option altogether: "hypoallergenic" pets. According to many breeders associations, certain breeds of cats and dogs secrete less animal allergen and generate less dander than others — "hypo" means *less*, not *non.* Poodles, bichon frises, Portuguese water dogs and terriers are supposedly less likely to incite allergic attacks. For cats, the big-eared Devon Rex and Siberian breeds are touted as hypoallergenic.

But the term "hypoallergenic" is contentious. How can one breed be less allergy causing than another when a person's allergies are so individual? According to Dr. Ashley, there is no such thing as a hypoallergenic breed.

"Different [dog or cat] breeds have different qualities to their skin cells," Ashley says. "What we react to may be in higher concentrations in one dog [or cat] than another." Likewise, two allergic individuals can have entirely different reactions to the same dog.

Despite scientific skepticism, the growing popularity of "hypoallergenic pets" is undeniable. Even biotechnology companies have joined the bandwagon. Last fall, the Delaware-based biotech company Allerca announced its production of "the world's first scientifically proven hypoallergenic cats." At just $5,950, these "lifestyle pets" supposedly have undetectable allergen levels. Allerca claims to have bred its cats by selecting for those with a natural divergence in the gene that produces Fel d1. The process is totally natural … ish. However, a September 2006 BBC News report does quote Allerca's Steve May as saying, "there is really no modification of the gene."

Really? We may never know; that information is proprietary, the company says in its FAQ section. But Allerca kittens are selling like crazy. The company had them on backorder starting in 2004, and the sneeze-free kitties are so popular that Allerca has had to stop taking orders for one year "effective August 31st, 2007," just to increase its breeding pool. By the time this *EW* issue is out, we'll only have one week left to get those Allerca kittens.

But some, like Ashley Middleton, could care less about Allerca; after all, she's got her Nellie. With medication, lifestyle modification and tolerance for some sneezing, pet owners with allergies keep on lovin' their furry companions. 🐾

Ashley Middleton and Nellie