

Low Shedding and Hypoallergenic Dogs



If someone in your household suffers from allergies, you need to carefully consider whether adding a pet to the family is the right thing to do regardless of how much you love dogs!

There is a lot of misinformation out there in regards to the suitability of certain breeds, or mixes of breeds, for allergy sufferers – often referred to in the media as ‘hypoallergenic breeds’ or as dogs having a ‘hypoallergenic coat’.

Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a dog breed, a mix of breeds, or type of coat that is guaranteed not to trigger allergies.

People searching for a puppy are often misled by unscrupulous breeders, many of whom charge exorbitant prices for ‘designer breeds’. Because there is a market for these types of dog, they are often bred by ‘Puppy Farmers’ - breeders who mass-produce pups, often with little care for the welfare of their animals.

What does the term ‘Hypoallergenic’ actually mean?

The term ‘hypoallergenic’ refers to having a **‘decreased tendency to provoke an allergic reaction in humans’**.



What is an Allergy?

The allergy.org.au website defines an **allergy** as:

“Allergy occurs when a person reacts to substances in the environment that are harmless to most people. These substances are known as ‘allergens’ and are found in dust mites, pets, pollen, insects, ticks, moulds, foods and some medications.”

“Atopy is the genetic tendency to develop allergic diseases. When atopic people are exposed to allergens they can develop an immune reaction that leads to allergic inflammation. This can cause symptoms in the:

- » *Nose and/or eyes, resulting in allergic rhinitis (hay fever) and/or conjunctivitis.*
- » *Skin resulting in eczema, or hives (urticaria).*
- » *Lungs resulting in asthma.”*

“Most allergic reactions are mild to moderate, and do not cause major problems. However, a small number of people may experience a severe allergic reaction called anaphylaxis, which requires immediate life-saving medication. Allergens which may cause anaphylaxis include foods, insects and medications.”

It is interesting to note that, just like humans, some dogs can suffer from allergies and atopy – most commonly leading to itchy skin, inflamed ears, or intestinal upsets.

Before you get a pet, get some professional medical advice

Before adding a pet to the family, any allergy sufferer should consult with their medical health practitioner. It may be that a referral to an allergy specialist may help to resolve the issue. If not, an allergy treatment and management plan can be developed that minimises the risks of severe reactions.

If you or your family member’s allergy symptoms are mild and well-managed, and your medical health practitioner has given you clearance to have a pet, there may be things that you can do to help minimise the risk of allergy by understanding what triggers a reaction, and by selecting a low shedding breed of dog.

Dogs Victoria Fact Sheet

Before you get a Dog

Low Shedding and Hypoallergenic Dogs



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What causes humans to have an allergic reaction to our pets?

Research has shown that most allergy reactions are in response to the **dog's saliva**. The saliva is carried on the animal's hair and dander (dead skin cells) after the pet licks and grooms itself. The dog's environment becomes a source of allergen as well, with hair and dander building up wherever the dog has access. The hair and dander can also trap pollen, mould and other allergens, further aggravating the allergy response.

As you can imagine, the level of dander in the environment will have a lot to do with how often you clean your home, the type of flooring you have, and how often you groom, brush or bath your dog's coat.

Which breeds might be 'Lower Risk' or 'Allergy Friendly'?

Remember: *no dog breed is completely 'hypoallergenic'- they all produce saliva, and they all shed dander.*

However, some breeds of dog produce far less dander than others and, as a result, are considered 'allergy-friendly'. Contact with the actual dog, and time spent in the dog's environment, is less likely to result in exposure to high levels of dander. Therefore, these breeds are less likely to trigger allergic reactions.

The breeds of dog that are considered 'Allergy Friendly' tend to have some common characteristics:

- » A **single-coat** rather than a double-coat (thicker outer hairs with a soft undercoat), or they may be '**hairless**.'
- » Coats that are **low shedding** or retained (such as Poodles and Bichon Frise)
- » Generally **smaller in size** meaning less hair and dander to shed

As you can imagine, there are many breeds of dog that have these characteristics.

Some mixed breeds may inherit these characteristics depending on the coat type of their parents (although it is very unlikely that all pups in a mixed breed litter will have the same coat type).

Pure Breed or Mixed Breed?

For centuries, humans have bred dogs to assist them with their daily life – whether that be through assisting with hunting for food, controlling vermin, herding or guarding livestock, or simply as companions. Over time, the ability to consistently reproduce the same features in each generation lead to the development of breeds as we know them.

A breed of dog will have a consistent size and shape, a certain temperament, instinctive drives, and a particular type of coat – all things that contributed to making it fit for the function it was originally bred for.

Purebred dogs are those whose parents are of the same breed for many generations, all recorded in a national (or international) pedigree register. Although there is always some variation within a breed, the breeder can predict with a fair amount of accuracy what the adult dog will be like.

For an allergy sufferer looking for a low shedding or retained type coat, this predictability is important.

There is a lot of hype surrounding so-called 'hypoallergenic mixes' with the most commonly known ones being the 'Labradoodle' (a first-generation cross - with purebred Labrador and purebred Poodle parents) and 'Cavoodle' (a first-generation cross – with a purebred Cavalier King Charles Spaniel bred to a purebred Poodle).

These mixes produce pups that may differ widely in colour, coat type and adult size – making it a bit of a lottery for an allergy sufferer to make sure that they source a puppy that has the low shedding or retained coat type. The other problem with the popularity of these breeds is the emergence of some serious health problems due to unscrupulous breeding.

All dogs, whether pure-bred or mixed, can suffer from health problems. Some of these health problems are hereditary, meaning they are passed on to puppies from their parents. Defective genes that cause disease are present in all animals – even humans - but often the only time that the disease is seen when both the mother and the father carry the same defect.



Low Shedding and Hypoallergenic Dogs

Breeders of purebred dogs are usually very aware of potential health problems that are seen in their breeds and make sure they reduce the risks of passing on these diseases by health testing any potential breeding animals before they go on to produce puppies. This means that the risk of the disease occurring is minimised through good breeding practices.

For example, both the Labrador Retriever and the Poodle are at risk of an eye disease called Progressive Retinal Atrophy (PRA) that causes blindness. In both breeds, responsible breeders use DNA testing along with an annual examination of the eyes by a Veterinary Ophthalmologist to assess individuals they are considering using as breeding stock, and select the parents of any litter based on this information.

Unfortunately, many breeders of popular mixed breed dogs, assume that 'cross breeds are healthier' and do not think to do any testing at all. Add to this the breeding stock they are starting with are often the individuals that good breeders felt were not of sufficient quality to be bred, and you have a recipe for disaster.

Regardless of the breed or mix you are looking into, make sure you ask the breeder about what health testing they do and ask to see the health testing results of both parents.

Coat Care & Grooming

Although low shedding coats are terrific for allergy sufferers, it is important to be aware that these coat types require quite a bit more grooming to keep the dog's skin and hair healthy.

Poorly cared for coats can lead to the dog suffering painful skin complaints, particularly if foreign matter becomes embedded in the hair.

Low shedding and retained type coats require regular clipping to keep the coat at a manageable length and need plenty of brushing and combing to ensure that the coats do not form matts or knots. Hairless breeds may require additional skincare, especially in the summer months as they have less protection from the sun.

Ensure that when you are considering adding a low shedding breed to your family, that you consider the extra time you will require for regular maintenance grooming and budget for the costs of a professional groomer to keep your new pet's coat in good condition.

So how can I minimise the risks of allergy reactions?

1. **Carefully choose your dog** – do your research, select a breed that not only has the coat characteristics listed above, but also is of a size and temperament that fits your lifestyle. Where possible, meet the parents (or at least the mother) of the litter, and ask the breeder about relevant health testing they do. Spend some time with individuals of the breed so you can assess the level of reaction you or your family member may have.
2. Ensure that you **brush your dog regularly** to remove any loose hair and dislodge any dander before it is spread through your home. Regular bathing can also assist with this but make sure you use a dog-friendly shampoo and make sure your pet is completely dry and knot free afterwards.
3. **Regularly clean your home** – vacuum carpets, mop floors, wash all your dog's bedding, and regularly clean any air filters on home cooling or heating units.



Dogs Victoria Fact Sheet

Before you get a Dog

Low Shedding and Hypoallergenic Dogs

Breeds to Consider

Most people are aware that the Poodle has a low shedding, retained, coat and they are the source of the 'look' and 'feel' of many of the mixes of breeds promoted as 'hypoallergenic'. Poodles come in three different sizes – Toy, Miniature and Standard – so there is a size that suits any household.



But what other breeds should you consider if you are looking for an allergy-friendly breed?

If you prefer the Curled Type coats:

Bedlington Terrier	Bichon Frise
Kerry Blue Terrier	Irish Water Spaniel
Lagotto Romagnolo	Portuguese Water Dog
Spanish Water Dog	

If you prefer a Hairless Type Coat:

Chinese Crested	Peruvian Hairless Dog
Xoloitzcuintle	

If you prefer a Silky Type Coat:

Afghan Hound	Coton De Tulear
Havanese	Lhasa Apso
Lowchen	Maltese
Shih Tzu	Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier
Tibetan Terrier	Yorkshire Terrier

Remember that many of these breeds will require a high level of coat maintenance, so make sure that you ask your breeder about the amount of time you will need for grooming, and whether the breed requires regular clipping or trimming.

You can find out more about any of these breeds, by visiting the Breed Information pages of the Dogs Victoria Website www.dogsvictoria.org.au