



# Pet Allergy Worldwide Survey (PAWS) Backgrounder

## Allergies

An allergy is caused by an immune system reaction to a typically harmless compound (an allergen) in the environment. If an individual is hypersensitive to an allergen, the immune system produces antibodies which detect and destroy the allergen. The antibodies then stimulate the release of other chemicals, such as histamine, which effect local tissues and activate white blood cell defenders. The activation of the white blood cell defenders can cause the typical symptoms – sneezing, nasal congestion, coughing, wheezing, watery eyes and a scratchy throat – displayed during a human allergic reaction.<sup>1</sup>

## Allergies in Dogs and Cats

Similar to humans, dogs and cats can suffer from reactions to seasonal allergens, such as pollen, as well as from regular household allergens, such as dust mites. Although the underlying biological mechanism of the allergic response is similar in humans as it is in cats and dogs, the external symptoms are quite different. Humans often suffer from sneezing, coughing, runny nose, skin and eye irritation and sinus problems. Cats and dogs, on the other hand, are more prone to frequent itching, scratching and licking, and subsequent hair loss and skin irritation.<sup>2</sup>

Although manifested differently, the impact of allergies can be equally irritating and uncomfortable for cats and dogs as they are for humans. However, in a recent survey, 44% of pet owners admitted that they didn't realize their pets can suffer from allergies just like humans can, and more than half did not realize pet allergies are more likely to manifest during the human allergy season. In fact, 46% of owners suffer from allergies themselves and most of those felt more sympathetic and understanding towards their pets as a result – especially since animals cannot directly communicate their discomfort.

## Survey Methodology

Novartis Animal Health (NAH) conducted an online survey to investigate pet owners' awareness of canine and feline allergies. Pet owners from six countries were surveyed: France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK and US. Within each country, approximately half of the respondents were cat owners and the other half were dog owners. A total of 1,269 cat and dog owners completed the survey. About half of the respondents had a pet with a diagnosed allergy (618) and the other half (651) had pets who had not been diagnosed with an allergy. The survey took place over one week in February, 2012.

## Results

The survey revealed interesting results around pet owners' awareness of allergies in their dogs and cats:

- *44% of pet owners surveyed admitted that they didn't realize their pets can suffer from allergies as do humans*
- *More than half of pet owners did not realize pet allergies are more likely to manifest during the human allergy season*
- *43% of pet owners admitted that they wouldn't know how to tell if their pet was suffering from an allergy*
- *Fewer than one in three pet owners are aware of one of the most common allergic skin diseases - atopic dermatitis in dogs and allergic dermatitis in cats*
- *70% of pet owners admit they know little or nothing about treatment options available for pet allergies*
- *80% would like to know more about how to recognize and treat pet allergies*
- *This is especially important to pet owners since 71% view their pet as both part of the family and like a child to them and so want to do what's best for them*
- *46% of pet owners suffer from an allergy themselves, the most common being hay fever.*

The survey revealed that owners are more confident in identifying feeding, joint, or heart conditions, but conversely have low confidence in being able to recognize if their pet has allergies. Just under half of pet owners interviewed admitted that they wouldn't know how to tell if their pet was suffering from an allergy and less than one in three pet owners were aware

of one of the most common allergic skin diseases in pets, atopic dermatitis. Furthermore, 81% of pet owners identified that they would not know how to recognize the symptoms of atopic dermatitis.

## Implications

It is important that pet owners are aware of the signs and symptoms of feline and canine allergies, particularly during allergy season. Over 70% of pet owners believe that their pet is part of the family and like one of their children; therefore, they are eager to protect their pets in the same way. Pet owners can help their pet by taking a one-minute online quiz on [www.itchfreepet.com](http://www.itchfreepet.com) to see if their cat or dog might be suffering from allergies. The results of the assessment should be discussed with their veterinarian as experts in identifying and treating canine or feline allergies.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Web MD, Available at: <http://www.webmd.com/allergies/guide/allergic-reaction-causes> (Accessed March 28 2012) Reedy LM et al (eds). Allergische Hauterkrankungen bei Hund und Katze (2002)
- <sup>2</sup> *Veterinary Medicine*, Available at: <http://vetmedicine.about.com/od/diseasesandconditions/a/CW-DogCatAllergySigns.htm> (Accessed March 28 2012)