



Pet exposure may cut child risk of allergies, study shows

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Detroit-Children who grow up with cats or dogs may be less likely to suffer from pet-specific and other allergies, according to a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA).

The Henry Ford Hospital study, funded by the National Institutes of Health, is believed to be the first in the United States to show that early exposure to pets has a protective effect on developing pediatric allergies. It additionally showed children who live with pets may be less susceptible to ragweed, grass and dust mite allergies.

The 10-year study, published in the Aug. 28 issue of JAMA showed that children exposed to two or more cats or dogs during the first year of life were half as likely to develop common allergies at ages 6 or 7 than those not exposed to pets.

Children exposed early to pets had overall lower antibody levels and fewer positive skin test reactions to dog, cat, ragweed, grass and dust mite allergens.

"This study indicates that having a pet around when a child is very young may influence the development of a child's immune system," says Christine Cole Johnson, Ph.D., co-principal investigator and senior research epidemiologist for Henry Ford Hospital.

Johnson says researchers theorize that exposure to cats and dogs may influence the development of a child's immune system through exposure to endotoxins, bacterial products commonly associated with the presence of pets.

For the study, researchers followed 474 children born between 1987-1989 (242 girls; 232 boys). Data was collected prenatally, at birth and at regular intervals until the children were 6 and 7 years old. The study included blood tests that measure antibodies that cause allergies; skin reaction tests that show whether a person is hypersensitive to an allergen; and a pulmonary test that estimates the reactivity of the airways.