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Tara Parker-Pope on Health

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## The Myth of the Allergy-Free Dog

By *NICHOLAS BAKALAR*

Dog lovers with a pet allergy have a big problem when it comes to having a dog in the home. But the usual solution — getting a breed known to be hypoallergenic — may not be a safe bet. In fact, there may be no such thing as a low-allergy or allergy-free dog, according to a new report. The study found that the quantities of dog allergens in homes with supposedly hypoallergenic breeds are no different from those in homes with dogs widely considered non-hypoallergenic.

Ah-choo! Can any dog make you sneeze?

It is not even clear how a hypoallergenic breed earns the title. There is no single “official” list of them. Various breeds, often dogs that shed little hair, appear on lists posted on the Internet, and the American Kennel Club suggests 11 “hypoallergenic canine candidates,” including poodles, soft-coated wheaten terriers, schnauzers and the Portuguese water dog, made famous two years ago when the Obama family adopted one.

“I have no idea where this whole concept came from,” said Christine Cole Johnson, the senior author of the study, to be published online in *The American Journal of Rhinology and Allergy*. “It’s been around for a long time, and maybe people associated it with shedding. I think it’s just a legend.”

Christina Duffney-Carey, spokesperson for the kennel club, said that it “does not recommend or endorse any specific breed, nor does it claim that ‘hypoallergenic breeds’ will not affect people with allergies.” But, she adds, “there are many breeds with consistent and predictable coats that we suggest for allergy sufferers. These breeds have nonshedding coats, which produce less dander.”

It is possible that some breeds shed less dander — bits of hair and skin — than others. But according to this study, that may make little difference to allergy sufferers.

Previous studies have examined dog skin and hair to determine the amount of allergens they contain, and have found wide variations among individual animals, but no consistent differences by breed. This is the first study based on a sample scientifically selected to be representative of the national population to look at the actual dispersal of allergens in homes.

The scientists found that 60 of the 161 A.K.C.-recognized breeds were listed as hypoallergenic on one Web resource or another. But rather than entrust the matter to the opinions of the list-makers, the researchers decided to see whether breeds called hypoallergenic were actually shedding less of the major dog allergen, Canis familiaris 1, or Can f 1, where they live.

As part of a larger population-based long-term allergy study, the scientists collected dust samples from the homes of 173 one-dog families, and found that 163 of them produced measurable levels of Can f 1.

The numbers of dogs of each breed were not large enough to allow for analyses by individual breed, but the researchers compared quantities of allergens found in the samples using various categories of purebred and mixed-breed hypoallergenic and non-hypoallergenic dogs. No matter how they did the comparisons — even comparing dogs identified as hypoallergenic by the A.K.C. against all other dogs — they found no statistically significant differences in levels of Can f 1.

The authors acknowledge that their study has certain weaknesses. For example, the amount of time the dog spent in the room where the sample was gathered was not known, which could have affected the results. And the authors relied on the reports of the owners about the breed and ancestry of their dogs.

Still, Dr. Cole, an epidemiologist at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, said: “You can’t be assured that some breed is going to produce less allergen than another. Allergists, based on their experience, really think that it’s just individual dogs who have some variations based on genetics or behavior, who produce more allergens than others. But it’s not going to be a breed classification that predicts that.”