

Are Cats Really Attracted to People Who Are Allergic to Them?

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There is a popular belief that cats are attracted to people that are allergic to them. This belief probably comes from experiences that allergic people have had with some cats. We've all probably seen an allergic person in the presence of a cat that rubs up against her, tries to get in her lap and generally just tries to be near her. While it may be true that some cats may show friendly behavior towards people that ignore them, there is no evidence that they specifically pick on the allergic. If you think about it, such behavior by cats would require that they be able to identify those that are allergic, and then specifically treat them in a special way. It is possible that cats could identify people that were having an allergic reaction to them, but how could they identify allergic people before they had a reaction? Even if they could identify such people, why would they want to "pester" them with attention? Are cats cruel and get pleasure from seeing people suffer with allergic reactions? We have no evidence that cats are motivated in such ways and that they get pleasure from seeing people suffer.

A more likely explanation for the interactions that allergic people have with cats is that most of these people try to avoid or ignore the cats they encounter so that they can minimize their allergic reactions. Many cats are initially shy around unfamiliar people. They are often fearful and avoid people that approach them, try to touch them or pick them up. Cats seem to be less fearful and more friendly to people that do not initially try to approach or touch them but that just sit quietly and let the cats approach them first. So when the allergic person ignores the cat, it reduces her fears and makes her more likely to approach and interact in a friendly way, rubbing up against the person, soliciting petting and trying to get into the person's lap. If the allergic person yells at the cat, pushes her away, or does other aversive things, the cat is likely to leave, but she may try to come back later if the person is again quiet.

The rest of us have something to learn from the way that allergic people deal with cats. If we want unfamiliar cats to be friendly to us, we should ignore them at first and let them come to us. We should let them interact with us on their terms and then be gentle with them. Often this helps to establish good relationships with cats.