

*Thoracic Society of Australia and NZ Annual Scientific Meeting, Canberra  
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## **New data on cat ownership and risks of asthma and allergies in children**

A study of children born in Sydney hospitals between 1997 and 2000 has revealed new information on the influence of pet cats as a risk factor for asthma and allergies.

The Childhood Asthma Prevention Study has shown that children with pet cats have lower risk of atopy, or a positive skin prick test for allergy, compared with those who are not exposed to cats.

It showed that the reduced risk of atopic diseases, such as allergic asthma, rhino-conjunctivitis and dermatitis, does not depend on the age at which a child acquires a cat.

It also revealed there was little difference in the level of atopic conditions among children in the study when their cat was kept indoors or outdoors.

The Childhood Asthma Prevention Study findings are being presented at the annual scientific meeting of the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand at the National Convention Centre in Canberra.

Paediatrician, Dr Catarina Almqvist, said as part of the study, researchers were trying to test the immune response to pets among children with a particular focus on the age at which the youngsters were first exposed to the animals and whether they lived indoors or outdoors.

Pregnant women were recruited from antenatal clinics at six Sydney hospitals and a total of 616 children born between 1997 and 2000 were included in the study.

Dr Almqvist said none of the people involved in the study had a pet cat at the time of their child's birth.

Information on cat ownership and other factors, including whether they were allowed indoors, was collected at three monthly intervals in the first year of each child's life, and every six months afterwards to the age of five years.

Dr Almqvist said at five years, 516 of the children were assessed for wheezing by questionnaire and atopy by skin prick testing.

"Over the five years, 82 of those children had acquired a cat and 24 per cent of them lived in households where the pet remained outdoors," she said.

"At five years, 32 per cent of the 516 children had recent wheeze and 44.4 per cent were atopic to one or more allergen.

"Cat exposure in the first five years was associated with a reduced risk of atopy, but not wheeze compared with children in the study without pet cats.

"The surprising outcomes of the study were that cat ownership appears to be protective against atopy and it makes no difference if the cat is kept indoors or outdoors."

Dr Almqvist said parents of children considered to be in the high risk category for asthma were generally advised not to keep pet cats.

“However, the choice is theirs,” she said. “We now have information that will help people make more informed decisions.”

The study conducted by Dr Almqvist is supported by the Woolcock Institute for Medical Research.

Medical and scientific leaders from around the world have gathered in Canberra for the conference to address advances in the diagnosis and treatment of respiratory diseases that affect millions of people.

The conference finishes today (Wednesday)

**Media release written by Trevor Gill, Lighthouse PR**