

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ODOR INVESTIGATION - PETS

**My wife and I recently purchased a home (“as is”) in which the previous homeowner had cats as pets. There is an odor throughout the house. We have two young children with allergies. What steps should we take before moving in?**

**Answer:** A pet owner evaluation is an essential component of AET’s residential IAQ interview and investigation process. Pets do mark their territories and particularly cats do not confine their markings to floors/carpeting but also include book shelves, furniture and inside restricted openings such as vents. Marking includes, residual from scent gland secretions, dried saliva and urine. A recent residential case found signs of urine/feces in an attic which had been converted into a bedroom. The staining and material observed was present on exposed insulation in the side wall areas of the attic between the open joists (remainder of the floor was finished).

It is obvious that odor detection is determined by your olfactory sense (your nose) and noxious odors tend to be more pronounced upon first exposure. Odors can be significant even with limited visible staining. Pet urine contains urea, uric acid, salts as well as ammonia, amines and mercaptans. Exposure to these chemicals can pose adverse health effects particularly in children, the elderly and in sensitive individuals. Symptoms generally include eye/nose irritation and respiratory problems. Additionally, with pets of the feline persuasion, their saliva contains proteins and other allergens which adhere to their fur that is shed throughout their territory.

### **Recommended Steps for Your Situation include:**

1. **Hire a licensed pest control operator** to inspect your home for vermin (it may not be the cat or dog responsible). Openings in attic eaves, crawl spaces, and siding can permit larger animals such as raccoons, opossums, and skunks to nest in the warmth of the home. Make sure existing odors are from past occupancy and uninvited guests are properly and completely evicted.
2. **Complete a home-wide inspection** for urine staining and odors including floor and wall cavities. A fluorescent (UV) or black light can be used to identify past markings. Search at night for markings with the area as dark as possible. Stains will luminesce and look yellow/greenish in color. Mark stains with tape for future cleaning. Odors can be tracked by following your nose (as long as the odor hasn’t permeated throughout the house). Check the obvious attic, basement and crawl space. If odors remain check at wall outlets, recessed overhead lights, and fireplace flue. Always check the fresh air intake for your heating and ventilating system.
3. **Discard items of limited value** (such as old carpeting) rather than cleaning. Newer carpeting can be professionally cleaned but also check the carpet pad. AET recommends replacement of the pad rather than cleaning. Remember, even though stains may be gone by black light inspection, some odors can remain. The goal of cleaning is twofold; remove the offending material to the extent feasible, followed by neutralizing any remaining residues.
4. **Hire a professional restoration company** to perform required cleaning where significant staining is present or odors remain. Check their references and get a written description/plan of their restoration process. Agree on the outcome and acceptance criteria, before you begin.
5. **Consult with your family physician** regarding your children’s allergies and potential symptoms regarding past pet occupancy or any future pets you introduce to your home. Additional safeguards such as increased air filtration, use of specialty vacuums and cleaning frequency may be required.

**Note:** As discussed in AET’s Tip of the Month ([Allergy Proof your Home](#)) the best way to protect your children’s health is; no smoking, no pets, limited carpeting and the use of vacuum equipment with HEPA filters for cleaning.

When you need professional help or advice, email Alan Sutherland, CIH, CHMM at [a.sutherland@aetinc.biz](mailto:a.sutherland@aetinc.biz) or call 610-891-0114. We provide nationwide services; phone consultations are free. Check out the full range of environmental contracting/consulting services we provide at our website [www.aetinc.biz](http://www.aetinc.biz).

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