

# Cat can protect against asthma

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Don't throw out the cat — that's one of the suggestions emanating from Massey University research into asthma. **MARIANNE BETTS** reports.

GROUND-BREAKING research by Massey University has debunked the widely-held belief that most asthma is caused by exposure to allergens.

The university's public health centre director, Neil Pearce, said that at most only half of asthma cases were caused by allergic inflammation of the airways, triggered by allergens such as dust mites and cats.

Professor Pearce said the other half was caused by non-allergic mechanisms, but researchers did not know what these were because attention had been focused on allergens.

The allergic response mechanism was always thought to be the reason why babies became asthmatics in the first place, but the new findings had put these beliefs in doubt, he said.

"If you're having a baby, you're supposed to get rid of the cat, but quite a few studies have shown that having a cat early in life actually protects against asthma.

There was little evidence that exposure to allergens early in life caused asthma, and if it did, it could only account for at most half of the cases, he said.

Professor Pearce and Jeroen Douwes, from Massey, Peter Gibson, from Australia's John Hunter Hospital, and Dr Juha Pekkanen, from Finland's National Public Health Institute, analysed 22 research papers to produce the findings.

The results were published in the latest edition of the British Medical Association's *Thorax* journal, which

also carried an editorial supporting the study's conclusion.

Professor Pearce said that for the past two decades the focus had been on the idea that allergens caused asthma, so preventing asthma meant reducing exposure to allergens.

"We thought that if we fitted plastic covers to our mattresses, threw out our carpets and gave away the cat, the problem would be solved," he said.

"But this latest research shows that though allergen exposure may cause asthma in some cases, it is not the overwhelming cause that it is hyped up to be.

"This misguided approach has meant we have lost valuable time and wasted valuable resources."

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It had been claimed that New Zealand had the highest asthma rates, with the greatest severity, in the world, but in fact the rates were the same as other English speaking countries.

"We've spent 20 years trying to find out what is unique about New Zealand, when in fact, we should be trying to find out what we have in common with other English-speaking countries."

Professor Pearce said 600,000 asthmatic New Zealanders created an economic burden of \$800 million a year, so the accurate targeting of both prevention and treatment was fundamental.

In order to prevent asthma, it was important to discover what the other causes of the condition were. The centre would now focus much of its Health Research Council funding on learning more about these non-allergic mechanisms.

Studies were under way with the Malaghan Institute of Medical Research to investigate the basic processes involved in non-allergic asthma. A three-year study had also begun on why children living on farms were less likely to contract asthma.

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