Allergy Prevention

Office of Research Integrity
Animal Users Health and Safety Program

WHY IS ALLERGY PREVENTION IMPORTANT?

Allergies to animals are a common health issue in research and teaching animal facilities and are recognized as an occupational hazard. Individuals with preexisting allergic conditions face a greater risk of developing allergies. The objective of allergy prevention is to inform and educate people about safe work practices to minimize their exposure to allergy-causing agents, such as animal urine, saliva, dander, and hair. Pollen in bedding or hay, as well as latex or other products, may also cause allergies.

WHAT ARE COMMON ALLERGY SYMPTOMS?

Respiratory Symptoms
People are frequently exposed to allergens, or allergy-causing agents, when they inhale them. Over a period of time, some people may develop sneezing, a runny nose, and irritated eyes—the symptoms of a cold, without fever. More severe reactions, such as asthma (coughing, wheezing, and shortness of breath) may occur. Respiratory symptoms may appear minutes or hours after exposure, and they usually persist.

Skin Conditions
Symptoms of allergies caused by contact with an allergen can include a rash (red, bumpy, scaly, or irritated skin) or hives. An example of a contact skin allergy is a reaction to latex.

Anaphylaxis
In extremely rare cases, life-threatening anaphylactic reactions can occur. Common symptoms include generalized itching, difficulty swallowing, hoarseness, shortness of breath, dizziness, fainting, and nausea.

ALLERGY PREVENTION INCLUDES RISK ASSESSMENT

An important part of an allergy prevention program is evaluating a person’s risk of allergy. Allergy risk is assessed by review of the Animal Users Health and Safety Program’s Health and Wellness Survey.

The survey must be completed by:
- URI employees that come into direct contact with animals (e.g., animal care staff, farm employees, researchers),
- Individuals who are listed in IACUC protocols involving animals (except fish and amphibians), and,
- Students that come into contact with animals through research or coursework.

Once completed, the form is reviewed by the Occupational and Environmental Health Network (OEHN) and/or URI Health Services.

If allergy concerns are identified, OEHN and/or URI Health Services staff will contact the individual to offer specific recommendations for each individual regarding allergy prevention programs, safe work practices, and/or the need for additional training, tests, or treatment. In some cases, URI Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) will be asked to participate in assisting the individual with the recommendations.
HOW CAN YOU PREVENT ALLERGIES?

- Limit your exposure to allergens.
- Enforce controlled access to animal facilities.
- Use good personal hygiene: always wash your hands after contact with animals and before leaving the laboratory or animal facility.
- Do not eat, drink, smoke, handle contact lenses, or apply cosmetics in work areas, and wash your hands before engaging in any of these activities.
- Avoid wearing street clothes while in an animal facility, especially if working with animals.
- Follow appropriate housekeeping procedures: After working with animals, do not dry-sweep working surfaces. Instead, use a damp cloth or another wet method for cleaning and sanitation.
- Perform animal manipulations in well-ventilated areas and, if possible, in ventilated hoods or safety cabinets.
- Wear personal protective equipment:
  - Wear lab coats, scrubs, or coveralls when working with animals, and have work clothes laundered in the workplace.
  - Wear goggles and a mask, especially if splashing may occur.
  - Wear disposable gloves when in contact with animals or their excreta.
  - Wear a respirator while in areas where the concentration of airborne allergens is elevated (e.g., highly populated animal rooms, cage dumping areas, cage washer). Remember that disposable surgical masks may not offer protection against allergens. Properly fitted masks, such as N95 particulate respirators, provide superior protection. Participation in fit testing and medical clearance are required with respirator use.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU SUSPECT YOU HAVE AN ALLERGY?

- Consult your health care provider if you have general allergy concerns.
- Consult the URI Health Services and/or your private physician for work-related allergy concerns.

ACCESS TO ANIMALS

To gain access to animals, individuals must complete the OHW Survey (and be medically cleared), review the training material and complete acknowledgement form, and be listed on an approved IACUC protocol (if conducting research).

If you have any questions on the information presented in this fact sheet, contact:

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