BACKGROUND

This document provides information about potential zoonotic and allergenic exposures, along with physical injuries that can occur while working with or exposed to laboratory rodents and rabbits. Laboratory rodents and rabbits are almost always free of zoonotic pathogens due to ongoing vendor efforts to improve the health status of animals, as well routine periodic infection surveillance programs by facility staff. Care should be taken, however, to determine if animals have been experimentally infected animals. In this case, special precautions are in place (e.g., special housing and personal protective equipment) to minimize the risk of an exposure to a pathogen. There is still a risk of allergen exposure while working with these animals. The safe work practices are provided as suggestions for staff and researchers who work with animals, in animal facilities, or with animal products.

PHYSICAL INJURIES

Personnel handling rodents, such as mice, can be bitten if the animal is poorly restrained. Though mice are often inclined to bite when frightened, fortunately their incisors do not always penetrate disposable gloves to break the skin. Bites can be caused by poor handling and restraint technique, which can also cause injury to the mice. For rabbits, personnel can be injured by bites (incisors) or scratches (especially by the hind feet) when handling. Generally, these are caused by a lack of knowledge of how to handle, transport, and restrain a rabbit. If you are nervous working with rodents or rabbits or do not know how to properly handle and restrain them, ask for help.

ALLERGIES

People can develop an allergy to rodents and rabbits over time after having contact with them. Mouse urine is particularly allergenic, and fur proteins can also be allergenic. For this reason, you should consider always wearing disposable gloves and a protective gown or scrubs to prevent skin contamination, and a mask to prevent aerosol exposure to urine and fur proteins. People who develop allergy symptoms should seek medical counseling, and they may have to wear special protective equipment or even discontinue working with this species if symptoms are severe after exposure. For more information, refer to the Allergy Prevention Document.
SAFE WORK PRACTICES

1. Good Personal Hygiene
   a. Practice good personal hygiene.
      i. Avoid contact of mucous membranes with contaminated hands or materials.
      ii. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water as soon as feasible (substitute alcohol-based disinfectants if water is unavailable- if hands are soiled, use “baby wipes” or similar material to remove dirt before using a sanitizer).
   b. Do not eat, drink, or use tobacco products in animal facilities.

2. Personal Protective Equipment
   a. Use proper PPE for work setting as appropriate (e.g. gown, facemask, protective sleeves). Maintain dedicated protective clothing and footwear while working with animals or in animal facilities. Do not wear the same protective clothing outside of animal facility.
   b. In most cases the PPE used when caring for laboratory animals is for the protection of the animals from diseases you might carry.

3. Animal Care
   a. Isolate sick or infected animals when possible.
   b. Handle and care for sick or infected animals last.

4. Cleaning and Disinfecting
   a. Maintain clean, dry, and uncluttered animal areas and workspace.
   b. Disinfect laboratory work surfaces after each use. Use only disinfectants approved by facility managers and that are suitable for the potential agents identified in this information sheet.
   c. Dispose of deceased animals, animal products, items contaminated by animal products, contaminated bedding, and laboratory waste in a facility approved manner.

5. Medical Attention
   a. Students: Contact URI Health Services (874-4763) for medical evaluation if you suspect any exposure, or if you develop any symptoms associated with infection with zoonotic agents (e.g., fever, malaise, diarrhea, abdominal pain). Alternatively, see your own personal health care provider if any injury or potential exposure to a zoonotic agent occurs.
   b. Employees: Contact URI Environmental Health and Safety if you suspect any exposure, or if you develop any symptoms associated with infection with zoonotic agents (e.g., fever, malaise, diarrhea, abdominal pain). Alternatively, see your own personal health care provider if any injury or potential exposure to a zoonotic agent occurs.

REFERENCES