



GUIDANCE FOR LABORATORY ANIMAL WORKERS

Introduction

In addition to the many hazards across the University there are those for animal exposure you must read the risk assessments relating to the work activity you are about to undertake. This guidance is to help protect your health from being adversely affected by exposure to laboratory animals in the workplace.

The problem

Allergy to laboratory animals can occur at any time in anybody of any age and there is no gender difference. However as the majority of cases generally arise in the first two years of exposure health surveillance is more intensive over this period.

Exposure can occur to anyone who enters the unit even without direct animal contact. All are potentially vulnerable and it is difficult to predict who will develop allergic symptoms, or how severe they may become. Many symptoms may be annoying but some (eg. asthma) are potentially / can be very serious.

Symptoms arise from the allergic reaction to proteins from mammals, often but not exclusively, from their excreta. The proteins become airborne and can be inhaled or settle on exposed skin and clothing, so direct animal contact is not necessarily required. This can then lead to the body mounting a response that produces symptoms.

Symptoms that may be due to allergy

Following recommended procedures diminishes the likelihood of developing symptoms but does not eliminate it. Symptoms to look out for are described below.

- Skin - A nettle-type rash [urticaria] or red itchy areas [eczema] that may scale.
- Eyes - Itchy and red.
- Nose - Sneezing, itchy, runny or dry with blocking.
- Lungs - Dry cough, chest tightness, wheezing or unexpected shortness of breath on exertion.

All the above may occur or clearly be made worse when at work, but those affecting the lungs can also occur many hours after leaving the workplace.

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What to do if symptoms arise

If you experience any of the symptoms described above you must report this to the unit manager, your line manager or Health and Safety Manager. If health surveillance is required this must be undertaken for you to be allowed to continue working in the unit. The Occupational Health Service (OHS) will assist in trying to identify the cause of the problem and where practicable to protect your health whilst you continue to work. This may be achieved by additional control measures, modification of tasks performed or using additional personal protective equipment (PPE). However, the OHS cannot offer treatment; for this, you must see your General Practitioner.

If you already suffer from allergies you may be at an increased risk of progressing to severe symptoms more rapidly.

Operating procedures

The procedures are designed to minimise your exposure so far as is practicable, emphasising a minimum of time in the area of risk and the use of PPE. You must use the PPE as instructed. If you have not received instruction and training in the use of PPE then report this to your manager. Similarly, raise any queries or concerns over equipment and if any equipment is not fit for purpose. It is your health and you have responsibility for it.

Health surveillance

Health surveillance is a process which monitors levels of health over a period of time when it has been identified that a particular activity causes risk to your health. A risk assessment will be used to identify the level of initial and ongoing risk. This is offered to those who are defined as laboratory animal workers. The extent and outcome of the surveillance will be influenced by a number of factors in addition to the potential for exposure. It may be used as a tool check that control measures in place are adequate.

Those with additional risk factors when working with animals may have a history of atopy [hay fever, eczema, asthma] or allergy to pets and this may influence recommendations given.

The key determinant for health surveillance for animal workers is the risk assessment which should consider the following:

- Frequency and duration of exposure
- Nature of exposure
- The allergenicity of the animal
- Number of species
- Nature of the specific work undertaken

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Laboratory animal worker – definition

Anyone with exposure to laboratory animal allergens of: -

- More than 2 hours per week or
- More than 24 hours over 12 weeks or
- Potential exposure in a high-risk activity.

Animal worker allergy surveillance process

