

## Animal Care and Use Program | Occupational Health and Safety

### Animal Allergies

#### What are animal allergies?

Animal allergies are an occupational health hazard for persons working with both laboratory and agricultural animals. An animal allergy may develop when a susceptible person is exposed to allergens produced by animals. Animal allergies are associated with exposure to urine, saliva, dander, hair, fur and feathers. Individuals who have existing allergies (especially to domestic animals) or suppressed immune systems may be at a higher risk for developing animal allergies. Animal allergies may also affect persons who have never been exposed to animals. The allergens are sticky and may be carried on an exposed person's hair, clothing or papers. In this way, non-exposed coworkers and family members may be sensitized to the allergens and develop animal allergies.

#### What are the symptoms of animal allergies?

The most common symptoms are:

- itchy, watery eyes
- runny nose
- irritation and redness of skin
- wheezing
- shortness of breath
- chest tightness

#### What should I do if I think that I am developing animal allergies?

If you think you may be developing animal allergies, notify your supervisor and the Occupational Health and Safety Specialist at 217-244-0781. You should contact your primary care physician to discuss your symptoms. If you are a student, you can also contact McKinley Health Center at 217-333-2701.

The Animal Care and Use Occupational Health and Safety Program provides health screenings for employees and students caring for and using animals in teaching and research. The Health Screening Questionnaire is completed by the employee and is confidentially reviewed by the Occupational Health and Safety Program Medical Reviewer. It is important to indicate on this form if you are experiencing animal allergies. The form can be found on the Occupational Health and Safety website at: <http://animalresdev.web.illinois.edu/about/occupational-health-and-safety-programs>

In some cases, the use of a respirator may be required. The Division of Safety and Compliance (S&C) coordinates the University of Illinois Respiratory Protection Program on campus. If a

respirator is needed, S&C will recommend appropriate respiratory protection and provide the required training and fit testing.

**How can I reduce my exposure to animal allergens?**

Exposure to animal allergens can be reduced by using:

- engineering controls (biosafety cabinets, enclosed caging, absorbent bedding, adequate HVAC system)
- work practices (job rotation, frequent and dustless cleaning, hand washing and showering)
- personal protective equipment (gloves, uniforms or dedicated work clothing, lab coats)

**Because animal allergens can cause symptoms at low concentrations, only complete avoidance of the allergens is effective for prevention of symptoms.**

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has published the following recommendations:

<p>Tips for Employees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Avoid wearing street clothes while working with animals</li><li>• Leave work clothes at work and launder at work to avoid exposing family members and coworkers</li><li>• Keep animal areas and cages clean</li><li>• Perform animal handling and manipulations under a biosafety cabinet if possible</li><li>• Use changing and dump stations when cleaning cages</li><li>• Spend as little time as possible in animal housing areas</li><li>• No eating or drinking in animal areas</li><li>• Wear required PPE to reduce exposures</li><li>• Wash hands and shower after working with animals</li></ul>	<p>Tips for Employers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Adjust ventilation to reduce animal allergens in the air</li><li>• Decrease animal density in rooms</li><li>• Use ventilated or filter-top caging</li><li>• Use absorbent bedding</li><li>• Provide PPE for employees</li><li>• Train employees about animal allergies and what to do if allergies develop</li><li>• Coordinate Respiratory Protection Program for employees who need to wear a respirator</li></ul>
--	--

**References:**

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. January 1998. Alert: Preventing Asthma in Animal Handlers, DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 97-116

National Research Council (NRC). 1997. Occupational health and safety in the care and use of research animals. Washington (DC): National Academies Press