

What you need to know

Animal allergy is an allergic response which may develop as a result of exposure to animal allergens. This information provides advice on reducing the chance of you developing allergies whilst undertaking animal / insect work.

Why is animal allergy such a problem?

Up to a quarter of people who regularly work with animals and insects develop allergic reactions to proteins secreted in their urine, dander, or excreta. Usually this only causes annoying symptoms such as an itchy nose or watering eyes but asthma can occur. All persons working with animals / insects are at risk, even if allergy has never been a problem before.

The development of allergy

Allergenic material becomes airborne whenever animals / insects move around in their cages or are handled. Minute particles of soiled bedding; skin and droplets of urine – aeroallergens – get thrown up and can remain suspended in the air for some time. These are then breathed in or settle on exposed skin and clothing during work. Skin contamination with allergenic material is inevitable unless gloves are worn during the handling of animals or bedding.

In some people, allergens absorbed across the lining of the lung, or through breaches in the skin stimulate the immune system to produce antibodies that trigger an allergic reaction whenever subsequent exposure to the allergen occurs, even at very low levels. The development of allergic antibodies – sensitisation – appears to be linked more to peak rather than cumulative exposure, so even exposures of 1 – 2 hours per month can be dangerous if it involves high exposure work.

Controlling the problem

If you follow recommended work practices and comply with recommendations and rules on the use of protective clothing and equipment you will substantially reduce your risk of allergy. If you think you are developing an allergy don't ignore it, report it to your supervisor and Occupational Health (OH) immediately.

Reducing exposure

Animal / insect handling

- Always conduct animal handling in accordance with the specified operational procedures (SOPs) for the work. You must familiarise yourself and comply with these before starting work.
- Learn – and follow – safe handling and experimental techniques. Gentle handling and manoeuvring will reduce the risk of startling the animal and lessen the plume of aero-allergen in your breathing zone.
- Always use the appropriate local exhaust ventilation (LEV) for your work e.g., negative pressure isolators, downflow tables, cage change stations, microbiological safety cabinets)

Protective clothing and equipment

- Use of protective clothing in accordance with the SOPs and dispose of used protective clothing as directed. NEVER wear this clothing outside work.
- If you are responsible for your own protective clothing, launder these regularly to prevent them becoming a store for allergens. Keep work clothes separate from other clothing.
- You are advised to always wear gloves when handling animals, to prevent skin contact with dander or urine.
- In many work areas face masks must be worn, see 'Checking the Fit of your Face-Mask' leaflet for further information

Housekeeping and hygiene measures

- Keep your work areas clean. Waste materials should be promptly bagged and correctly disposed of.
- Bench tops and trays must be cleaned with either a detergent solution or an appropriate biocide as soon as the examination or procedure is completed.
- Always wash your hands after handling animals / insects even if you have worn gloves.
- Your attention to hygiene will help protect others using the same facilities and reduce the risk of spreading infections that may be present in your animals / insects.

Health Surveillance

Whilst you are working with animals / insects OH will regularly monitor your health. This will be at the start of your work exposure, with a review at three and six month intervals post commencement of work and at annual intervals thereafter, unless otherwise indicated.

If you think that you may have symptoms of animal / insect allergy you must report these to OH as soon as you become aware of them, don't wait for your next health surveillance questionnaire to arrive before reporting.

We will then arrange a confidential assessment to establish whether or not you have become sensitised, and advise you about any additional precautions that may be necessary to enable you to safely continue with your work and studies.

The earlier you report symptoms, the easier it is to prevent allergies progressing.

NOTE: Compliance with Health Surveillance is **compulsory**. If you fail to attend an appointment and / or complete and return a surveillance questionnaire, your department will be informed and your access to facilities reviewed. For vets your Departmental Administrator will be informed.

Allergy symptoms:

- Eyes: itching; watering; redness; swollen eyelids
- Nose: itching; runny nose; sneezing bouts
- Skin: itching; cracked skin; small blisters; nettle rash (urticaria);
a wheal & flare reaction (swelling and inflammation) if scratched
- Lungs: coughing/wheezing, chest tightness, shortness of breath

Eye, nasal and most skin symptoms tend to occur during work. Asthma symptoms may not occur until some hours after exposure. If you experience **any** of these symptoms, report it!

Should you have any questions or think that you have developed symptoms please contact:

University of Cambridge
Occupational Health Service
16 Mill Lane
Cambridge
CB2 1SB

Tel: 01223 336594

Email: OccHealth@admin.cam.ac.uk
www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/oh/



**UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE**

Occupational Health Service

Information for staff and students

Allergy to Animals, Insects and Arthropods