Allergy to animals guidance

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**Introduction**

Laboratory Animal Allergy (LAA) is a relatively common condition which develops in between 15-35% of people who work with animals.

Allergy may also develop in persons not directly working with animals but who are regularly exposed to them e.g. by working in areas like laboratories which are used for experiments involving animals.

LAA is a hypersensitivity or allergic response which may develop as a result of repeated exposure to substances called allergens. The common allergens are proteins from body tissue, excretions and secretions of most mammals, insects and birds’ urine, hair/fur, dander/animal dandruff, saliva and serum, bird droppings may all contain allergenic proteins.

The symptoms of LAA are similar to those of hay fever. They include:

- Rhinitis (sneezing/running nose)
- Skin rashes
- Conjunctivitis
- Weals on skin around bites and scratches
- Asthma

The most common symptoms are running eyes and nose. Symptoms usually develop within 6 months of first starting work with animals and in most cases within a 2 year period.

It is not possible to predict who will develop symptoms of LAA and any person working with animals who thinks they may be experiencing symptoms should contact their school or unit safety advisor, manager or supervisor who will be able to refer the individual to the Occupational Health Service for further investigations. In order to protect their health all staff and students should:

- Always change clothes or put on appropriate over clothes on entry into animal units and remove all protective clothing on leaving.

- Make proper use of any control measures provided, e.g. ventilation, safety cabinets, etc as well as any personal protective equipment as specified in the local rules and standard operating procedures. Any defects in equipment should be reported immediately to the supervisor.

- Adopt high standards of personal hygiene and make proper use of washing facilities provided.
Do not eat, drink, chew or write reports (brief notes excepted) in animal units where allergen contamination may exist.

Attend any health surveillance sessions as required by the University.

Report any symptoms as soon as possible to their safety advisor, manager or supervisor.

**Control measures**

Under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations the University must prevent or, if this is not reasonably practicable, adequately control the exposure to animal allergens. This control is achieved by a variety of measures including implementation of local rules, standard operating procedures, and safe systems of work, ventilation and personal protective equipment.

**Access to animal care facilities**

Access to the animal care facilities is restricted to essential personnel only. Access by staff employed within the facilities is dependent on the individual undergoing health surveillance and working in accordance with established local rules and working procedures.

**Ventilation**

Ventilation systems in animal facilities are designed to contain and remove aeroallergens; however they can only reduce and not eliminate the contact. The ventilation is designed to pass clean air over the worker towards the animal cages and thus the contaminated air is drawn from the animal cage into the extract ducts. Any disturbance of the air e.g. movements of caging, equipment and personnel within the room will disturb this air flow and thus may reduce the effectiveness of the ventilation and therefore the level of protection.

Ventilation provides no protection against direct skin contact with allergenic material from handling animals. Effective control depends upon the use of protective clothing and work practices that are designed to reduce exposure times and amounts. The ventilation systems are maintained and tested under the COSHH Regulations annually by Estate Operations.

**Personal protective equipment (PPE)**

All persons (students, cleaners, maintenance workers, technical staff, academic staff and visitors) entering a University Animal Facility must wear the protective clothing as specified for that facility. The requirements will vary between facilities and will be identified in local rules and protocols. The minimum requirement will be a change of
laboratory coat but in some circumstances a complete change of clothing will be required. This protective clothing **must not** be worn outside the facility or in any rest/communal/tea room and should be disposed of as directed. Where respiratory protection is specified in the local rules/standard operating procedures it **must** be face-fitted by a competent person (unless it is of a type that does not rely on a tight fit to the face) and worn in accordance with the training received. When carrying out any procedure likely to release allergen respiratory protection must be worn according to risk assessments.

All personal belongings or outdoor clothing will only be permitted in designated areas of the animal facilities. No laboratory coats or other protective clothing worn in other areas of the University will be permitted within the animal containment facilities. This is to prevent passive exposure of other members of staff to animal allergens.

All personnel entering animal containment facilities will be expected to have read and to comply with the local rules and standard operating procedures for that facility.

**Transport of animals**

It is the aim of the University to reduce the passive exposure to animal allergens by reducing the amount of animal movements through buildings to laboratories by providing more experimental animal space within the animal facilities. Whenever small animals are moved out of animal units they must be transported in filtered boxes or cages.

**Working practices.**

The Manager of the Animal Care facility is responsible for carrying out risk assessments and for implementing the local rules and standard operating procedures. These should include a reference to: eating, chewing, drinking etc., cleaning, animal handling and transport, cage cleaning, use of PPE including respiratory protection, management of PPE, skincare and how to report symptoms.

**Health surveillance**

A health surveillance programme including respiratory questionnaires and lung function testing (spirometry) as required is carried out by the Occupational Health Service. All staff exposed to animal allergens will be assessed as part of this programme having been referred by their SSA/Manager.
Responsibilities

Head of School or other Unit

It is the responsibility of the Head of School or their delegate to ensure that all activities within Animal Care Facilities have been risk assessed. Records of risk assessment should be kept and updated at least every 5 years or after any significant change in the working environment or practices.

Training, information and instruction regarding LAA, control measures, PPE, and working practices must be provided for every employee. This should be done on recruitment and re-iterated regularly in response to changes in work environment or activity, professional guidance and best practice.

Records of training in the use of and the issue of PPE should be kept.

Employees

All personnel entering animal facilities are required to attend health surveillance arranged by the Occupational Health Service.

Employees have a duty under health and safety legislation to co-operate with local arrangements for health and safety and to abide by local standard operating procedures and protocols.