University of BRISTOL

Occupational Health

LABORATORY ANIMAL ALLERGY

Background

One third of people working with Laboratory Animals (including mammals and insects) develop allergic reactions to proteins secreted in animal urine, fur, hair, dander, saliva, droppings and serum. Commonly the allergy is due to exposure to mice and rats because these are the animals most likely to be used in experimental research.

What are the symptoms?

Eyes: watering, redness, itching, swollen eyelids
Nose: runny nose, itching, bouts of sneezing
Skin: itching, urticaria i.e. swelling and inflammation if scratched
Lungs: wheezing, chest tightness, shortness of breath, coughing

If you develop any of these symptoms, please inform your Manager, School Safety Adviser (SSA) or Occupational Health immediately.

Who is at risk?

Everybody exposed to Laboratory Animals has the potential to develop an allergic response. This includes animal technicians, researchers, maintenance staff and anyone else who is in contact directly or indirectly with the animals.

What can I do to prevent this?

Limit your exposure as much as you can. Look at your work practices. Only enter the animal care facility when necessary and spend as little time as possible with the animals. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) must be worn in designated areas. Wear the appropriate face-mask or respirator as identified in your local procedures or systems of work. Wearing gloves when handling animals or bedding is essential in preventing exposure to allergenic material. Not wearing protective clothing in non-animal areas e.g. offices to avoid exposing other staff to the allergens. Avoid inhalation of dust or aerosols by always following correct work procedures. Report any symptoms as soon as they happen to your line manager, SSA and Occupational Health. Good housekeeping and hygiene measures which include, ensuring your work area is clean and waste is correctly disposed of, washing your hands after handling animals even if you have worn gloves.

What causes the allergy?

Allergenic material becomes airborne whenever animals move in their cages or are handled. Mi-nute particles of soiled bedding, skin and drop-lets of urine can remain suspended in air for sometime. These can settle on exposed skin/clothing or be breathed in during work. Research indicates that allergies usually devel-op within 6 months to 2 years of exposure; how-ever they may also develop after many years of working with laboratory animals. Research also suggests that a history of asthma or allergies may make a person more susceptible to developing symptoms.

The Lung Function Test

The questionnaire and the test are designed specifically to detect any symptoms and changes in lung function as early as possible. The aim of the questionnaire and lung function test is to detect any symptoms or changes in lung function, (which might be due to allergens) as early as possible. You will be asked to breath into the spirometer and various measurements of each breath are taken and interpreted by the machine. The spirometer compares your individual results with the expected results for a healthy person of your age, race, gender and height and your results are expressed as a percentage of the expected result.

Any questions please contact the Occupational Health Service.

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