

Are You Developing Laboratory Animal Allergies?

If you feel that you may be developing allergies to lab animals, it is important that you report this to your supervisor.

You may also take part in the UTRGV Animal Care Program's Occupational Health and Safety Program whereby you will be put into contact with an occupational health specialist who can assist you in recommendations of further health care or in the use of preventative measures available to you.



Preventing Asthma in Animal Handlers,
January, 1998 DHHS (NIOSH) Publication
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*Environmental Health, Safety
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UTRGV™

UTRGV's Guide to
Preventing Animal-Related
Allergies in the Laboratory



Why Is Animal Allergy Awareness Important?

When working with animals it is important to be aware of the risk of developing allergies from the animals you work with or even from your own pets.

If you become allergic to the animals you work with, your job can become quite uncomfortable and even unhealthy.

If you have asthma, working with animals to which you are allergic can be a significant health risk.

Symptoms:

Allergy symptoms can range from minor to severe. People who are having an allergic reaction can have symptoms such as:

- Runny nose, sneezing, or coughing
- Nose/head congestion, watery or itchy red eyes
- Hives
- In more severe cases - asthma attacks (chest tightness, shortness of breath and wheezing)
- Very severe cases- anaphylaxis (life threatening swelling of the upper airways and shock).

These symptoms can occur in as little as 10-15 minutes or can be delayed for up to 8 hours after exposure. Symptoms can develop anywhere from months to years after a person begins working with animals.

A majority of the individuals who are going to develop symptoms will do so within the first year. It is extremely unusual to develop symptoms after more than two years of animal contact.

How Allergies Start:

People who work with or even near animals can be allergic to any animal species.

First, the person must become sensitized to the material that causes the allergy. These materials are called allergens. The allergens are proteins that are excreted in the animals' saliva, urine and from various glands associated with the skin. The proteins tend to be sticky and become associated with the animal's hair and with particles of dander and can float around in the air.

Allergens are unique in each animal species and that is why a person can be allergic to mice but not rats or cats but not dogs. It is also possible to be allergic to more than one species.

In fact, if you are allergic to something (an animal species or anything else) you are more likely to become allergic to something compared to a person who is not allergic to anything.

Relative Risks:

Various studies have shown that the incidence of animal allergies among people who work with animals ranges from 10% to 44%. This means that most people who work with animals are not allergic to them. However, this also means that if you work with animals, your risk of allergy to them is as much as three times higher than people who do not work with animals. Allergy to animals is particularly common in workers exposed to animals such as cats, rabbits, mice, rats, gerbils and guinea pigs.

The most important risk factor for the development of laboratory animal allergy is the level of exposure to animal allergens. Certain tasks such as changing cages and handling animals can cause the individual to be exposed to high levels of allergens, which may hasten the onset of allergic symptoms.

Other factors that may put you at risk for developing a laboratory animal allergy:

- A personal history of other allergies such as hay fever
- Individuals with a family history of developing allergies
- Smoking

How to Minimize Risk of Exposure:

The following are actions that you can take to decrease your exposure:

- Do not eat or drink in areas where animals or their bedding are handled.



- Wash your hands frequently. Avoid touching your hands to your face.
- Wear protective equipment such as masks, hair and shoe covers, gloves, and long sleeved gowns when cleaning cages or handling animal byproducts.



Wear personal protective equipment

- Do not wear your street clothes when working with animals. Wear a lab coat or scrubs, or even a disposable gown.
- Change clothes and wash or shower before leaving work to avoid bringing laboratory animal allergens home with you.