

# STONEHILL COLLEGE Allergy Prevention

## **Why is allergy prevention important?**

Allergies to animals are a common health issue in research and teaching animal facilities and are recognized as an occupational hazard. Individuals with preexisting allergic conditions face a greater risk of developing allergies. The objective of allergy prevention is to inform and educate people about safe work practices to minimize their exposure to allergy-causing agents, such as animal urine, saliva, dander, and hair. Pollen in bedding or hay, as well as latex or other products, may also cause allergies.

## **Who benefits from allergy prevention?**

- Animal care staff, veterinarians, and veterinary technicians
- People named to animal protocols (including visiting scholars and undergraduate students)
- IACUC (Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee) members
- Stonehill employees who may not have direct contact with or responsibilities related to animals, but who as part of their job duties work in animal housing facilities or animal procedure rooms where others work directly with animals (e.g., custodial staff, building maintenance staff, tradespeople)
- Outside contractors working in animal housing facilities
- Volunteers
- Visitors
- Students enrolled in classes that use vertebrate animals

## **What are common allergy symptoms?**

### **Respiratory Symptoms**

People are frequently exposed to allergens, or allergy-causing agents, when they inhale them. Over a period of time, some people may develop sneezing, a runny nose, and irritated eyes—the symptoms of a cold, without fever. More severe reactions, such as asthma (coughing, wheezing, and shortness of breath) may occur. Respiratory symptoms may appear minutes or hours after exposure, and they usually persist.

### **Skin Conditions**

Symptoms of allergies caused by contact with an allergen can include a rash (red, bumpy, scaly, or irritated skin) or hives. An example of a contact skin allergy is a reaction to latex.

### **Anaphylaxis**

In extremely rare cases, life-threatening anaphylactic reactions can occur. Common symptoms include generalized itching, difficulty swallowing, hoarseness, shortness of breath, dizziness, fainting, and nausea.

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## **Allergy prevention includes risk prevention**

An important part of an allergy prevention program is evaluating a person's risk of allergy. Allergy risk is assessed by review of the *Risk Assessment Form* (RAF) and/or the *Medical Evaluation Form* (MEF). The RAF must be completed by all individuals who are listed in low-risk protocols and by those who have indirect animal contact (visitors and students who have animal contact through classroom activities are excluded). Once completed, the form is reviewed by the Occupational Health and Safety Office of the Department of Environmental Health and Safety. If allergy concerns are identified, the information is forwarded to Health Services.

Personnel listed in protocols assigned to the moderate- or high-risk level, as well as all animal-care staff members, must submit an MEF to the Occupational Health Office. Occupational medicine professionals review the MEF and offer specific recommendations for each individual regarding allergy prevention programs, safe work practices, and/or the need for additional training, tests, or treatment.

## **Medical Evaluation Form**

Completion of a medical evaluation form is required for animal care staff, veterinarians and technicians, individuals named to medium- or high-risk protocols for the use of vertebrate animals, and individuals whose personal medical background, as identified by the risk assessment form, may affect their risk.

An occupational medicine professional reviews completed medical evaluation forms. Occupational Health staff contact individuals if there is a need for further information or a medical appointment.

## **How can you prevent allergies?**

- Limit your exposure to allergens.
- Enforce controlled access to animal facilities.
- Use good personal hygiene:
  - Always wash your hands after contact with animals and before leaving the laboratory or animal facility.
  - Do not eat, drink, smoke, handle contact lenses, or apply cosmetics in work areas, and wash your hands before engaging in any of these activities.
  - Avoid wearing street clothes while in an animal facility, especially if working with animals.
- Follow appropriate housekeeping procedures:
  - After working with animals, do not dry-sweep working surfaces. Instead, use a damp cloth or another wet method for cleaning and sanitation.
- Perform animal manipulations in well-ventilated areas and, if possible, in ventilated hoods or safety cabinets.
- Wear personal protective equipment:

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- Wear lab coats, scrubs, or coveralls when working with animals, and have work clothes laundered in the workplace.
- Wear goggles and a mask, especially if splashing may occur.
- Wear disposable gloves when in contact with animals or their excreta. - -
- Wear a respirator while in areas where the concentration of airborne allergens is elevated (e.g., highly populated animal rooms, cage dumping areas, cage washer).

**Remember** that disposable surgical masks may not offer protection against allergens. Properly fitted masks, such as N95 particulate respirators, provide superior protection. Participation in fit testing and medical clearance are required with respirator use.

**What should do you if you suspect you have an allergy?**

- Consult your health care provider if you have general allergy concerns.
- Consult the Occupational Medicine Office for work-related allergy concerns.