

The VSU IACUC occupational health and safety program is designed to inform individuals who work with animals about potential zoonoses (diseases transmitted to humans from animals), personal hygiene to prevent zoonotic transmission, and other potential hazards associated with animal exposure. This information sheet is directed toward those involved in the care and use of laboratory animals who are at risk for allergic reaction and asthma.

Animal-related asthma and allergies are exaggerated reactions of the body's immune system to animal proteins, also known as allergens. Allergens are excreted in the animals' saliva and urine, and from various glands associated with the skin. The proteins tend to be sticky and become associated with the animal's hair, scales, and/or particles of dander. The allergens are unique to each species of animal, so it is possible to be allergic to mice and not to rats and vice versa. It is also possible to be allergic to multiple species; in fact a person who is already allergic to one allergen (animal or otherwise) has a greater chance of becoming allergic to a new allergen than a person that has no allergies at all.

The National Institute for Occupation

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Symptoms vary among workers who have become sensitized to animals. Mild reactions include allergic rhinitis (a condition characterized by runny nose and sneezing similar to hay fever) and allergic conjunctivitis (irritation and tearing of the eyes). More serious reactions to an inhaled allergen may result in asthma symptoms such as cough, chest tightness, wheezing, or shortness of breath. Animal workers who have become sensitized may also experience contact dermatitis (a red, bumpy rash that may appear where his/her skin touches the animal).

A worker who has developed asthma symptoms from animal allergies often improves or recovers completely if he or she immediately stops being exposed to dusts containing the animal allergens. However, the longer the exposures continue, the more likely the illness will persist, even after all contact with animals has stopped.

Those who work with animals should be aware of the signs and symptoms of animal allergies. If you have a stuffy nose or other respiratory signs and if these symptoms seem to last longer than a common cold (weeks instead of days), then you may be suffering from an allergy. If you develop suspicious symptoms when you are exposed to a certain species, you have an animal allergy. In sensitized workers, reactions often occur soon after exposure to the animal or animal product, but they may be delayed for two to eight hours or more.

If your job requires you to be exposed to something to which you know you are allergic, you should discuss with your health care provider what effect the allergy may have on your future health. Some workers are so severely affected that only a change in career will control their allergies.

If you suspect you have developed an animal allergy, you should see your health care provider. He/she can diagnose animal allergy or sensitizat

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