

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 in animal use protocols (including visiting scholars and undergraduate students)
- McGill University 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., administrative staff, 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.

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 cleaning and maintenance 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 biological safety cabinets.
- Wear personal protective equipment:
 - 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.
- Transport animals as per SOP 501.01 - Animal Transport and Use Outside of Animal Facilities.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU SUSPECT YOU HAVE AN ALLERGY?

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