

Occupational Health for Animal Handling

Care and Use of Cats

The Occupational Health Program is designed to inform individuals who work with animals about potential zoonoses (diseases of animals transmissible to humans), personal hygiene, and other potential hazards associated with animal exposure. This information sheet is directed toward those involved in the care and use of cats.

Potential Injury and Zoonotic Diseases: Cats are generally social animals and respond well to frequent, gentle human contact, however, any cat can become agitated when being restrained for procedures. Due to the penetrating nature of their bites, cats can inflict serious bite wounds and prompt first-aid is particularly important when dealing with an injury from a cat. Cat bites should always be reported to EH&S. Scratches are also a hazard when dealing with cats. It is essential that training be provided to all employees who handle cats in order to avoid injury. The following is a list of potential zoonotic diseases associated with cats.

Cat Scratch Disease: Caused by the bite, scratch, or lick of a cat. Causal agent of the disease is not clearly defined. The disease is benign and heals spontaneously (from 7 to 20) days after symptoms appear and are characterized by regional lymphadenopathy (swollen glands) along with signs of a mild systemic infection consisting of fever, chills, generalized pain, and malaise.

Toxoplasma: A protozoan, *Toxoplasma gondii* has its complete life cycle only in cats, which are the only source of infective oocysts. Other mammals (including people) may become intermediate hosts. It takes at least 24 hours for oocysts shed in the feces to become infective, so removal of fresh feces daily reduces the risk of acquiring infection. Toxoplasmosis in people resembles mild flu-like symptoms unless immune suppressed (in whom it may cause ocular and neurological disease). Infection in a previously uninfected pregnant woman can result in prenatal infection of the developing fetus, which can result in birth defects. Should an accidental mucosal or needle stick exposure occur, medical services should be obtained.

Ringworm: Dermatophyte infection (most commonly *Microsporum* spp. and *Trichophyton* spp.) is commonly known as ringworm because of the characteristic circular lesion often associated with it. Dermatophytes are classified as fungi and may not be readily apparent. Disease in people is from direct contact with infected animal. Ringworm is usually self-limiting, and appears as circular reddened rough skin and is responsive to prescription topical therapy.

Pasteurella multocida: This bacterium resides in the oral cavity or upper respiratory tract of cats. Human infection is generally associated with a bite or scratch. Human infection is generally local inflammation around the bite or scratch, possibly leading to abscess formation with systemic symptoms.

Rabies: Rabies virus (rhabdovirus) can infect almost any mammal. The source of infection to people is an infected animal. The virus is shed in saliva 1-14 days before clinical symptoms develop. Any random-source (animal with an unknown clinical history) or wild animal exhibiting central nervous system signs that are progressive should be considered suspect for rabies. Transmission is through direct contact with saliva, mucus membranes, or blood, e.g. bite, or saliva on an open wound. The incubation period is from 2 to 8 weeks or even longer. Symptoms are pain at the site of the bite followed by numbness. The skin becomes quite sensitive to temperature changes and there are laryngeal spasms. Muscle spasms and extreme excitability are present and convulsions occur. Rabies in unvaccinated people is almost invariably fatal. Rabies vaccine is available through Occupational Health at Student Health Services..

Other Diseases: There are several other diseases that can be possibly spread through working with cats. Cryptosporidia, Giardia, and Campylobacter are transmitted via the fecal/oral route. These

diseases in people are exhibited by acute gastrointestinal illness; diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and fever. Clinical signs are generally brief and self-limiting.

Allergic Reactions to Cats

Allergies to cat fur and dander are well documented. The major allergen in a cat is a protein that is produced in the sebaceous glands of the skin which coats the hair shafts. This protein is also found in saliva of cats.

How to Protect Yourself

- Wash your hands. The single most effective preventative measure that can be taken is thorough, regular hand washing. Wash hands and arms after handling any animal. Never smoke, drink or eat in the animal rooms or before washing your hands.
- Wear gloves. When working with cats wear appropriate gloves for the task and wash your hands after removing gloves.
- Wear respiratory protection. Dust masks should be worn when there is a risk of aerosol transmission of any zoonotic agent or when there is a medical history of allergies.
- Wear other protective clothing. Lab coats should be available and worn when working with the cats. Avoid wearing street clothes while working with animals. Lab coats should be laundered at work.
- Seek Medical Attention Promptly. If you are injured on the job, promptly report the accident to your supervisor, even if it seems relatively minor. Minor cuts and abrasions should be immediately cleansed with antibacterial soap and then kept clean and dry. For more serious injuries or if there is any question, students should report to OSU Student Health Services, employees (faculty and staff) to the Corvallis Clinic Occupational Health department. For more serious injuries or if there is any question, students should report to OSU Student Health Services, employees (faculty and staff) to the Corvallis Clinic Occupational Health department.
- Tell your physician you work with cats. Whenever you are ill, even if you're not certain that the illness is work-related, always mention to your physician that you work with cats. Many zoonotic diseases have flu-like symptoms and would not normally be suspected. Your physician needs this information to make an accurate diagnosis. Questions regarding personal human health should be answered by your physician.