

Occupational Health for Animal Handling

Care and Use of Rabbits

The Occupational Health and Safety 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 laboratory rabbits.

Potential Injury and Zoonotic Diseases

Rabbits are generally docile animals that are easy to handle and pose minimal risks of contracting a zoonotic disease to laboratory personnel and animal care staff. The development of disease in the human host often requires a preexisting state that has compromised the immune system. If you have an immune-compromising medical condition or you are taking medications that impair your immune system (steroids, immunosuppressive drugs, or chemotherapy) you are at higher risk for contracting a rabbit disease and should consult your physician. The primary concern when working with rabbits is developing allergies and injuries from scratches and bites. Prior to your assignment, you should receive training in specific handling techniques, and specific protective clothing requirements. The following is a list of known and potential rabbit zoonoses.

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

Cryptosporidiosis: An extracellular protozoal organism, cryptosporidium is transmitted via the fecal-oral route; waterborne transmission is also important. In humans infection varies from no symptoms to mild gastrointestinal symptoms to marked watery diarrhea. The infection is generally self-limited and lasts a few days to about 2 weeks. In immunocompromised individuals, the illness is more severe.

Other Potential Diseases: While none of the following are commonly associated with laboratory rabbits, these diseases are associated with rabbits. *Brucella suis* biotype 2, cheyletiella infestation, francisella tularensis, plague, Q-fever, and trichophyton mentagrophytes.

Allergic Reactions to Rabbits:

Allergies to rabbit fur and dander are well documented. A major glycoprotein allergen can occur in the fur of rabbits and minor allergenic components found in rabbit saliva and urine has been identified as a source of allergies.

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 rabbits, their bedding or contaminated water. Never smoke, drink, or eat in the animal rooms or before washing your hands.
- Wear gloves. If you are in a situation in which you will handle the rabbits, their bedding or other items potentially contaminated with rabbit feces, wear appropriate gloves.
- 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 protected from exposure to rabbits. 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 rabbits. 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 rabbits. 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.