TULANE UNIVERSITY
ANIMAL HANDLER HEALTH SURVEILLANCE PROGRAM

Program Information

The Animal Handler Health Surveillance (AHHS) Program is designed to protect Tulane personnel (including employees and students) from occupational exposure to conditions that may result in animal-related illnesses. Illnesses include, but are not limited to, allergic reactions, rabies, Hepatitis B, and tuberculosis. Please refer to the brochure entitled “Health and Safety in Animal Research” for information on the risks and hazards of animal research.

As part of the AHHS program, animal handlers, caretakers, and researchers who have frequent or substantial animal contact must complete a Risk Assessment & History Form (RAHF) prior to working with animals and must have periodic medical evaluations. The RAHF indicates how the person’s position involves contact or exposure to animals, the types of animals involved, the frequency of exposure, the health history of the person including prior tetanus or rabies vaccines, and recommendations for additional immunizations and screening. The RAHF is reviewed and follow-up is initiated (as necessary) with the individual based upon medical history noted in the completed form, the type of animal contact, screening, and immunizations required by the program. If additional medical surveillance is required, the person is notified and advised to see a medical practitioner who can provide a statement that it is okay for the person to work with animals or if there are any restrictions. In addition, periodic medical evaluations are done to assess the continued health of these personnel.

Support personnel and visitors who do not have substantial or frequent animal contact, such as Facilities Services employees who do not directly handle the animals must also complete the RAHF as described above. The RAHF is reviewed, and they are strongly advised to complete any recommendations for further medical evaluation if deemed necessary. They are informed of conditions of concern and of the risks and hazards associated with animal research. This group is classified as visitors.

Personnel who do not respond to written requests to participate in the AHHS Program are not allowed to enter or work with animals.

All Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) protocols are reviewed to ensure that all personnel with animal contact participate in the AHHS program. All Tulane personnel listed on an IACUC-reviewed protocol are provided information on the AHHS program by the Office of Environmental Health and Safety (OEHS).

Principal investigators are responsible for ensuring that all personnel involved with their IACUC-reviewed project are given AHHS program information. Principal investigators and their personnel who do not respond to written requests from OEHS to participate in the AHHS Program will not be allowed to enter or work with animals in animal housing facilities.

AHHS Program Elements

I. Risk Assessment and History Form (RAHF)
The RAHF is required to be filled out by Tulane personnel who will have contact with animals or animal tissues in conjunction with teaching or research at Tulane University. The completed RAHF will be reviewed to determine whether additional information, follow-up, and/or interaction are necessary. The RAHF is submitted to the appropriate representatives of OEHS for further processing and data entry.

Important information required on the form includes the animal classification (based on species), frequency of animal contact, and an explanation of how animal contact or exposure will occur. It is critical that the individual provides accurate information on the RAHF which may also be reviewed by a licensed healthcare provider if further medical evaluation is warranted.

NOTE: If the individual refuses to complete a RAHF or participate in the AHHS Program, they may not be allowed to enter or work with animals.

II. Immunizations and Screening

- Tetanus immunization is highly recommended for all individuals with animal contact. A booster shot is needed if it has been 10 or more years since the previous tetanus immunization.

- The Hepatitis B vaccination is required to be offered to individuals who work with animals/animal tissues that are known to be genetically altered with human or non-human primate genes or tissues that are known to carry the hepatitis B virus (HBV). Refusal to accept the vaccine must be provided in writing.

- Semi-annual tuberculosis (TB) screening is required for individuals who handle non-human primates (Class C) or those who are working with animals or tissue infected with Mycobacterium species.

- Rabies immunization is recommended for individuals who handle with dogs, cats, or ferrets. (Class B) A titer will be required if previously vaccinated.

Other immunizations and screenings may be necessary based on the species of animal and type of work. Costs for any required medical examinations, including tests, screening and immunizations are the responsibility of the individual’s budgetary unit.

It is recommended that all personnel review their allergy status on an annual basis with a physician or other licensed healthcare provider.

III. Medical Evaluation

If any question in the History section of the RAHF is answered YES and if the condition is related to animal handling, or if work involves animals or tissues experimentally infected with human pathogens, or if the person has additional health concerns (related to animal handling) to discuss with a licensed healthcare provider, then one of the following actions must be initiated:
A. The person may schedule an appointment with a Worker’s Compensation or OEHS-approved occupational health clinic. The cost of this medical examination and any subsequent follow-up will be the responsibility of the individual’s budgetary unit. OR

B. The person may schedule an appointment to see their own licensed healthcare provider for medical examination and/or follow up. The cost of this medical examination will be the responsibility of the person involved.

C. Students who are not employees may coordinate medical examination with the Student Health Center. The cost of the exam, immunizations, and screenings are the student’s responsibility if not covered by the student’s health insurer.

If follow-up includes medical evaluation by an occupational health clinic or the individual’s physician, then a written report must be completed and signed by the licensed healthcare provider. The written report must indicate whether or not the individual is medically qualified to work with the specified animals; it must also include the dates of any immunizations and/or screenings specifically required by the AHHS program. These documents will be kept by OEHS (or TNPRC Occupational Health) in confidence in the same manner as the submitted Risk Assessment and History Forms.

IV. Recordkeeping

An electronic record will be developed and maintained by OEHS of all individuals who have completed and submitted the RAHFs. Completed RAHFs and related medical documentation will be kept in a confidential manner and in accordance with Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations.

V. Program Compliance

Personnel who fail to comply with the AHHS Program may not be allowed to enter or work with animals in teaching or research at any Tulane campus. If a principal investigator or other person wishes to contest the decision for failure to comply, they may submit a request in writing to the AHHS Workgroup. Contact OEHS at 988-5496 or via email at OEHSRAHF@tulane.edu.

VI. Animal Handler Health Surveillance Workgroup

An Animal Handler Health Surveillance Workgroup has been established which includes representatives from the OEHS, the Department Comparative Medicine (DCM), the Biosafety Office, TNPRC Occupational Health, and the Assistant Vice-President for Environmental Health & Safety.

The Workgroup will meet at least annually and is responsible for the following:
  • Development, revision, and approval of policies and procedures associated with the AHHS program;
  • Ensuring that the list of approved personnel (e.g., those who completed RAHFs) is sent to DCM and TNPRC Occupational Health on a monthly basis;
  • Ensuring that principal investigators and personnel are participating in the program as
prescribed;
• Reviewing issues involving the AHHS program and developing recommendations;
• Presenting issues and recommended action to Senior Administration and
• Annual evaluation of the AHHS program.

VII. References

• Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals, National Research Council
• Occupational Health and Safety in the Care and Use of Research Animals, National Research Council
• Tulane University Environmental Health & Safety Policies & Procedures Manual
  http://tulane.edu/oehs/upload/PPMFullWebA.pdf

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