

Occupational Health - Fact Sheet

ANIMAL BITES, SCRATCHES, AND KICKS

Bites, scratches, and kicks are potential hazards associated with contact with research animals. They may be prevented or minimized through proper training in animal-handling techniques. Personnel working with large domestic animals might sustain crushing injuries when the animals kick, fall, or simply shift their body weight. There are many safety issues when working with animals. Animals can be unpredictable. Bites and scratches are the most common physical hazards encountered when working with animals. Kicks and crushing injuries occur more frequently with larger species, such as horses or cows. In most cases these are preventable with proper training in animal handling procedures. Knowledge of animal behavior is important in predicting and responding to the animal's reaction.

Several factors need to be considered when working with animals. Animals respond to sounds and smells in the same manner as people. They also hear, smell, and react to things that people might not detect. These reactions can produce injury to an animal handler. Many animals have a "flight zone;" approaches by another animal or a person cause an attempt to escape. Being aware of an animal's flight zone will help avoid injuries. Many animals are social and show visible signs of distress if isolated from others of their kind. Knowledge of species-specific animal behavior is important in reducing risks.

Stay alert, handle the animals gently but firmly, do not make sudden movements or approach them in what could be seen as an aggressive manner, and do not make loud noises that could frighten the animals. When entering a confined space, ensure that you leave enough space to make a quick exit if necessary. Also ensure that you are not in a position where you could be blocked in by the animal or crushed.

Animal bites, especially those by rodents that inflict little tissue damage, are sometimes considered inconsequential by personnel who are unfamiliar with the host of diseases that can spread by this mechanism. Serious complications can result from wound contamination by the normal oral flora of the animals involved. Personnel should maintain current tetanus immunizations, seek prompt medical review of wounds, and initiate veterinary evaluation of the animal involved, if warranted. Rabies, B-virus infection, hantavirus infection, cat-scratch fever, tularemia, rat-bite fever, and orf are among the specific diseases that can be transmitted by animal bites.