Information for Immunosuppressed Personnel Working with Animals

What is immunosuppression?

Immunosuppression is a condition in which the immune system does not work as well as it does in normal healthy workers. Workers who have immunosuppression are considered to be immune-compromised. They are at higher risk of illness and/or more serious side effects of illness caused by an infectious disease. However, it is important to note that the National Research Council reports “Transmission of zoonotic disease in an animal facility that is not involved with infectious disease research is rare.”

What conditions cause immunosuppression?

There are many medical conditions that result in immunosuppression. In general, if you have a medical condition that causes problems with your immune system, your primary physician will have informed you. Some examples of immunosuppressed medical conditions include:

- Infection with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)
- Prolonged use of corticosteroid (cortisone) medications by mouth or by injection.
- Monoclonal antibody therapy
- Medications used by people who have received organ transplants
- Long term diabetes mellitus, kidney or liver disease
- Blood diseases (that affect the bone marrow or white blood cells, e.g., leukemia or lymphoma)
- Certain forms of cancer
- Cancer chemotherapy and radiation therapy
- Spleen removal

If I am immunosuppressed, what infections am I at increased risk for?

Many infectious agents that do not normally cause serious health problems in healthy people can cause problems in immunosuppressed individuals. A few examples include:

- Bordetella species (dogs, cats, and pigs)
- Bartonella species (cats)
- Campylobacter (many research animals)
- Cryptosporidium (many research animals)
- Ectoparasites, such as mites (many research animals)
- Giardia (cats, dogs, pigs, and sheep)
- Mycobacterium avium (birds)
- Mycobacterium marinum (fish)
- Salmonella (many research animals)
- Shigella (many research animals)

If I am immunosuppressed, what can I do to reduce my risk of infection?

- It is recommended that you discuss your condition and your work environment (animal exposure; frequency and duration, personal protective controls and other safety practices) with the staff at the University’s Occupational Health Services (OHS) clinic. This allows for planning of special precautions and work assignments according to risk factors.

To receive authorization for an OHS clinic visit, email the OSEH Medical Surveillance Coordinator