

Workplace Hazards in Working with Animals

This fact sheet is for students undertaking work experience programs, and for their host employers. It can be used as a tool to assist with task planning, and to develop appropriate induction, training and supervision to minimise any risk to students while they are 'at work'.

Students must be given an induction addressing health and safety issues, and must be supervised at all times. Hazards must be considered when allocating tasks. If a risk cannot be managed, students must NOT undertake the activity.

The hazards described here are commonly encountered in workplaces where animals are housed and/or treated: these include veterinary practices, wildlife sanctuaries and parks, zoos, animal shelters, stables, boarding facilities, pet shops.

Hazard	Possible Harmful Effects	Possible Employer Action to Prevent Injury / Illness	Preventative Action Students Can Take
Animals <i>Even usually placid animals may inflict injury if under stress or in pain. Animal behaviour is difficult to predict and may change without warning</i>	Bites, mauling, scratches (smaller animals) and Impact injuries such as fractures, crushing, bruising (larger animals)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Allow only experienced and trained staff to handle or restrain animals ◆ Instruct staff in safe animal handling ◆ Label cages where an animal's behaviour gives reason for concern ◆ Provide protective clothing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Students must NOT handle animals unless the animal and the task have been assessed by their supervisor ◆ Don't approach any animal unless assured by your supervisor that it's safe
Autoclaves / sterilisers	Burns, scalding from steam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Ensure that only trained and experienced staff operate autoclaves ◆ Ensure regular plant maintenance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Students must NOT be exposed to any dangerous plant or equipment
Animal enclosures, stalls and cages	Cuts from metal edges, manual handling injury, risk of infection or disease	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Regular cleaning and maintenance ◆ Design cages to minimise risk ◆ Provide wash-up facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Don't open enclosures, stalls or cages ◆ Wear gloves when cleaning
Hazardous substances (drugs used in treatment, anaesthetics, cleaning chemicals)	Cytotoxic (cancer treating) and other drugs can cause illness. Short-term effects can include nausea, headaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Follow strict handling, labelling and storage procedures for all hazardous substances ◆ Provide protective clothing (such as gloves) for staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Students must not medicate animals or handle any drugs used in animal treatment ◆ Wear rubber gloves when using cleaning chemicals
Hazardous waste (soiled towels, swabs, syringes etc.)	Infectious diseases, cuts or 'needle stick' injuries; irritation to skin, eyes, nose or throat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Treat all waste as hazardous ◆ Arrange for safe disposal into labelled containers ◆ Provide gloves where needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Wear rubber gloves when handling soiled material ◆ Don't handle syringes ◆ Adopt good hygiene practices
Housekeeping	Slips, trips and falls as a result of slippery surfaces or things left on the floor or on the ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Ensure that spills are cleaned immediately ◆ Keep work areas clear of items that could present impact hazards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Follow procedures for cleaning up spills ◆ Report any spills or obstacles
Manual handling	Musculoskeletal injuries (sprains and strains)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Assess every manual handling task ◆ Use mechanical aids or team lifts ◆ Train workers in manual handling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Don't attempt any task if you think it may be difficult to do safely – ask for help!
X-rays (radiation)	Significant health risks, including cancers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Minimise potential for exposure to X-rays during radiography 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Students must NOT be exposed to radiography processes
Zoonoses (diseases caught from animals)	Diseases including hydatid disease, ringworm, Q fever	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Minimise potential for zoonotic infections – training, safe work practices, vaccination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Always wash up after contact with animals ◆ Students must NOT enter any workplace where Q fever has been reported
Cuts	Infection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Ensure tasks with potential risk of cuts are assessed ◆ Provide protective gloves ◆ Provide washing facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Wear protective gloves ◆ Wash hands immediately ◆ Seek first aid immediately if needed
Allergies to animals or insects (or to animal feeds such as grasses)	Allergic reactions: respiratory illness, skin reactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Document any known allergies among staff members ◆ Prevent or minimise exposures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Follow safe working procedures ◆ Report any suspected allergic reaction to supervisor without delay
Sexual harassment, work place bullying	Emotional stress, fear and anxiety, physical illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Establish work place policy ◆ Provide staff briefings or training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Report any concerns immediately