

## ALLERGIES AND ALLERGENS

Frequently asked questions and answers, for staff and students who work with allergens or may encounter allergens in their working environment.

### Q1 What are allergies and the hazards associated with allergens?

Allergies and allergic reactions are the body's immune system reacting to substances in the environment which are harmless to most people. These substances are known as allergens. Some allergies are inherited through genetics and some are developed through repeated exposure to allergens, irritants or sensitisers. A substance which is an allergen to one person may not be for another person.

Some examples of allergies and allergic reactions include asthma; Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS); hives; eczema; hay fever; anaphylaxis.

Reactions to allergens typically present as redness, swelling or inflammation. These can occur in ears, nose, sinus, throat, eyes, skin, lungs, chest, stomach and bowels.

Most allergic reactions are mild to moderate and do not cause major health problems, but may be a source of irritation and discomfort.

### Q2 What are the common triggers for allergies which you should be aware of?

Common Allergens	Common Triggers
Chemicals	Pesticides and herbicides Glues, paints and solvents Detergents and other cleaning products Chemicals e.g. formaldehyde Solvents
Environmental	Industrial emissions Smoke from tobacco products Pollen Mould Weather changes Dust, including saw dust
Medicine	Prescribed medications, Anaesthetics and drugs
Food	Artificial colours, flavours and preservatives in food, drinks and nuts
Animals	Insect stings or bites Animal fur, hair, dander or waste
Other	Latex Colds and Flu Stress Perfumes, fragrances and deodorants

### Q3 What if I have a known severe allergy or life threatening asthma?

A small number of people may know that they suffer from severe allergic reactions to specific allergens. The most severe reaction is called anaphylaxis which causes breathing difficulties and can be fatal if untreated. If you have a known severe allergic condition which causes anaphylaxis or a life threatening asthmatic attack, you should inform people at work, i.e. colleagues, supervisor and first aider of the appropriate response. Your colleagues should understand how to respond should you have an attack i.e. this may include the immediate administration of medication and/or treatment by a medical practitioner.

### Q4 What are the obligations on employers for workers who are allergic to their physical working environment? (note this is not referring to tasks which are to be controlled via hazard management process)

- The University is required to make reasonable accommodation for those who have a temporary or permanent disability.
- The University is not required to endure unjustifiable hardship or to control people or situations which are beyond their control.
- A supervisor is not required to manage a person's medical condition; this is a responsibility of the individual in consultation with their medical practitioner. An allergy management plan may assist depending on the extent of the issue.

### Q5 Are there allergy related hazards when working with plants?

Yes. The most common plant related allergy is hay fever. During certain parts of the plant reproductive cycle, pollen, a known allergen, is produced. If you are working with plants, especially in an enclosed area such as a glasshouse, pollen levels will be increased. If you are sensitive to pollen you should take steps to minimise your exposure to such areas or by controlling your exposure to the allergen (e.g. breathing mask).

**Q6 Are there allergy related hazards when working with animals?**

Yes. Animal fur, hair, dander and waste are common allergens. Scratches and bites may also lead to a localised allergic reaction. Scratches and bites should be immediately washed with soap and/or antiseptic.

**Q7 What controls can I consider to reduce the risks from allergens, irritants and sensitisers?**

If possible avoid the allergen by applying the principles of Hazard Management [Chapter 3.5 Hazard Management](#). Consult with your medical practitioner for an appropriate treatment plan if you are working directly with an allergen or your allergy is severe.

**Q8 What happens if I develop a rash or other symptoms whilst at work?**

If you notice a rash develop after working with a particular plant or chemical discuss this with your supervisor immediately and seek medical treatment (if required). Report this as an incident in [RMSS](#).

**Q9 If I have an allergy to my physical environment what can I do?**

- You will need to manage it in consultation with your medical practitioner.
- Explore any solutions with your supervisor and your co-workers.
- Note that the University is required to make reasonable accommodation for those who have a temporary or permanent disability. However the University is not required to endure unjustifiable hardship or to control people or situations which are beyond their control.

**Q10 What are the hazards of exposure to allergens over time?**

- It is possible to develop an allergy through repeated exposure to allergens, irritants or sensitisers.
- If you believe that you are developing or have developed an allergy to an allergen in the workplace then a plan (that may include a risk assessment) should be developed in consultation with your supervisor and medical practitioner. The degree of planning will be dependent on the severity of the allergy, exposure rates to the allergen and the ability of the workplace to control the allergen.

**Q11 What do I do if a colleague/student appears to be severely suffering from an allergic reaction or asthma**

- Call or have someone else call an ambulance (0)000
- Contact or have someone contact your [local First Aider](#)
- Contact their supervisor as soon as practicable

**Q12 Where can I find more information about asthma and allergies?**

- [Australian Society of clinical immunology and allergy \(ASCIA\)](#)
- [Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia \(A&AA\)](#)
- [Food Standards Australia New Zealand \(food allergy information\)](#)
- [National Asthma Council Australia](#)
- [Pollen Calendar](#) (click on the plant name to find out information about the plant and what times of the year the plant is usually flowering all over Australia).

**Further Information**

If you have any questions or need advice please contact your local [Health and Safety Officer](#) (HSO), [Health and Safety Representative](#) (HSR) or [Faculty/ Division HSW Manager](#).

The University's Health, Safety and Wellbeing requirements and processes are available in the [HSW Handbook](#).