

## **Are there health concerns with touching farm animals?**

For many children and adults alike, visits to working farms and animal exhibitions such as petting zoos provide a rare and valuable opportunity to learn more about agriculture and rural life through close contact with animals.

Sometimes, though, animals can carry diseases that can be passed on to humans who touch them, are bitten or scratched by them, or come into contact with their saliva or feces. These diseases – known as zoonotic diseases or zoonoses – include cryptosporidiosis, *E.coli* infection, Q fever, ringworm and salmonellosis. Such diseases can result in serious illness.

Researchers have identified outbreaks of disease from contact with infected animals in many countries, including Canada, the U.S., the United Kingdom (U.K.), Australia and New Zealand. Dr. Paul Sockett, Director of Enteric, Foodborne and Waterborne Diseases at Health Canada, estimates that one or two outbreaks of *E. coli* O157:H7 linked to an animal exhibition are reported every year in North America.

There are precautions that you can take to minimize the risks associated with contact with animals.

## **How do I minimize the risk of illness?**

Protecting yourself from the potential transmission of disease from infected animals is a matter of limiting your exposure. The following measures are common to guidelines distributed by government bodies in the U.S., the U.K. and Canada:

- Pay attention to any signs that indicate which animals can and cannot be touched.
- Do not put your face against an animal, and avoid touching your face or mouth after touching an animal.
- Do not touch animal feces. If you should accidentally come into contact with animal wastes, wash and dry your hands immediately.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after touching the animals. Do NOT use baby wipes in place of handwashing as they do not kill germs like *E. coli* O157:H7.
- Avoid eating or drinking in areas around the animals. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before eating.
- Do NOT drink unpasteurized milk.
- Wear closed-toed shoes or boots. Clean footwear thoroughly when you leave the farm, or when you get home, and then wash your hands with soap and water.
- Contact your doctor if you develop unusual or bloody diarrhea, nausea or vomiting after being in contact with animals.
- Those at high risk for serious infections should consider taking extra precautions.

Practicing food safety basics such as hand washing will limit exposure to potential pathogens, but may not eliminate the risk entirely. Investigators of a 2002 outbreak that sickened more than 80 people in Oregon suspect that the bacteria may have been transmitted through the air in a building housing sheep and goats. Contact your doctor if you develop symptoms of disease.

***Information Sources:***

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