

Preventing Illness Associated with Animal Contact: How to Stay Healthy around Household Pets, Petting Zoos and Fairs

Introduction:

All animals can carry germs and pass infections to people. Infections with intestinal bacteria and parasites pose the highest risk for human disease.

Animals of particular concern for transmitting intestinal diseases:

- calves, lambs, and goat kids
- chicks and ducklings
- reptiles and amphibians
- any ill animal

Note: animals infected with disease agents frequently show no signs of illness.

Disease agents of most concern:

The most commonly reported intestinal disease agents associated with animal contact include *E. coli* O157:H7, *Salmonella*, *Cryptosporidium*, and *Campylobacter*. All can cause diarrhea, stomach cramps, and fever. *E. coli* O157:H7 is of special concern because some infected children develop a severe complication called hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS). HUS includes kidney failure and a severe decrease in certain blood cells. Extended hospital stays with kidney dialysis and transfusions are typically required, and 5-10% of HUS cases are fatal.

How people acquire infections from animals:

The primary mode of transmission is from feces of an animal to the mouth of the person by hand to mouth contact. Because animal fur, skin, and saliva can become contaminated with fecal germs, people can become infected when they pet, touch, or are licked by animals. Persons can also be exposed through contact with an animal's

living area, its bedding, fence rails or objects such as food and water dishes.

Groups at high risk for serious infection:

- children <5 years of age;
- persons with waning immunity (e.g., older adults);
- pregnant women;
- cognitively impaired persons;
- and, immunocompromised persons (e.g., those with HIV/AIDS, who are undergoing cancer treatment, immunosuppressive steroid therapy, etc.)

Prevention of disease:

- Golden Rule: Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after contact with any animal, animal product, or animal living area
- Supervise children <5 years of age when with animals
- Don't eat, drink, smoke, or allow children to carry toys or use pacifiers, sippy cups, or baby bottles in animal areas
- Don't clean animal cages, food dishes, or water dishes in food preparation areas
- People in high risk groups should avoid contact with baby chicks, ducklings, reptiles, amphibians, calves, lambs, or goat kids. These animals are not recommended as pets in households with a person in a high risk group.

Resources with more detailed information:

CDC Healthy pets health people website:
www.cdc.gov/healthypets
 March 25, 2005 MMWR, Compendium of Measures To Prevent Disease Associated with Animals in Public Settings:
www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5404a1.htm

