



News Release

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Health experts stress importance of hand hygiene when visiting animal attractions over the Easter holidays

Public health experts at the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) West Midlands are reminding families of the simple steps they can take to make sure they enjoy visits to farms and petting zoos safely, over the Easter Holidays and throughout spring and summer.

At this time of year, we typically see an increase in a number of gastro-intestinal infections such as cryptosporidium and E.coli associated with activities such as visits to farms and country parks. These infections can cause diarrhoea and stomach pains, and in serious cases can lead to severe illness. People mainly get infected by touching animals in petting and feeding areas, or by coming into contact with animal droppings or contaminated surfaces in the surrounding area to where animals are kept.

These harmful bacteria can get accidentally passed to your mouth by putting hands on faces or fingers in mouths before washing them thoroughly. It only takes a small number of the bacteria to cause infection, and once infected, you can pass the bugs on to other people, who may also become unwell.

Therefore, the UKHSA West Midlands Health Protection Team is urging anyone planning a trip to the farm to remember the importance of thoroughly and frequently washing hands with soap and water – especially before eating and after removing dirty shoes – to avoid getting bugs that could make them seriously ill. Young children should always be supervised when washing their hands as they are more at risk of serious illness.

Paul Fisher, Health Protection Consultant leading on environmental issues for UKHSA West Midlands, said: “Thousands of people in the West Midlands region go to animal attractions each year. Visiting a farm is a fun day out, which is enjoyable and educational, particularly for children. However, animals can be the source of several bugs that can be passed to humans and cause illness, with some infections particularly

serious for children or pregnant women. While the number of people who become ill is proportionally quite small, many cases could be avoided by practicing the correct hand hygiene.

“Infections can be picked up from the animal’s body, its poo or from areas where animals have recently been. If the germs are on your hands, you could accidentally pass them to your mouth. You can’t see the germs, so your hands may appear clean. Even if you’ve not been touching the animals themselves, you may have touched fences or other surfaces in areas with animals or sat on and touched grass that is contaminated.

“Washing your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water immediately after you’ve had contact with animals and before eating or drinking will reduce the risk of infection. Don’t use gels or wipes instead of soap and water, as these are not a substitute for washing your hands. Farms provide hand washing facilities, so we encourage people to make use of these to ensure the only things you take away from your visit are happy memories.”

What to do when visiting a farm

Following the simple rules listed below will help to keep you and your children safe from infections that may be found on open farms. Pregnant women need to take particular care as infections acquired from animals can be harmful to them and their unborn baby.

Do wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after you have touched animals, fences or other surfaces in animal areas. All open farms provide handwashing facilities for visitors.

- **Do** wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before eating or drinking
- **Do** remove and clean boots or shoes that might have become soiled and clean pushchair wheels – then wash hands thoroughly with soap and water
- **Do** supervise children closely to ensure that they wash their hands thoroughly – washing your hands should take about 20 seconds – the same time that it takes to recite a single verse of “Old Macdonald Had A Farm”
- **Do** eat and drink in picnic areas or cafes only
- **Do not** put hands on faces or fingers in mouths while petting animals or walking round the farm
- **Do not** kiss farm animals or allow children to put their faces close to animals

- **Do not** eat or drink while touching animals or walking round the farm – this includes not eating sweets, crisps or chewing gum
- **Do not** eat anything that has fallen on the floor
- **Do not** use gels or wipes instead of washing hands with soap and water – gels and wipes do not remove bugs in dirt
- If you are planning a school or group visit to a farm, you also need to make sure that you've considered all the risks and taken steps to manage them – guidance is available to help schools and teachers do this

For more information contact UKHSA West Midlands press office on 0121 232 9223/4 Out Of Hours 07834 311 393

Notes to Editors

1. What should I do if I feel unwell after a farm visit?

- If you or anyone in your group feels unwell or has any symptoms, for example is sick or has diarrhoea within two weeks of visiting a farm, contact your GP or call NHS 111 as soon as possible. If you or anyone in your group, particularly a young child, has bloody diarrhoea, seek immediate emergency medical attention.
- You should not attend school/childcare/work until you have been free of sickness or diarrhoea for two days. If you are diagnosed with Cryptosporidium, you must not go swimming until two weeks after you are free of sickness or diarrhoea as the bugs are resistant to chlorine. Tests may be required to confirm that a child is free from some infections.
- Parents should confirm with their health professional whether it is safe for them to return before the child returns to school or nursery.

2. Further information on zoonoses – infections that spread from animals to humans: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/zoonotic-diseases-zoonoses-guidance-data-and-analysis>

3. Advice for pregnant women on infections that can be transmitted via contact with animals that are or have recently given birth: www.gov.uk/guidance/pregnancy-advice-on-contact-with-animals-that-are-giving-birth

4. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) is responsible for protecting every member of every community from the impact of infectious diseases, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear incidents and other health threats. We provide intellectual, scientific and operational leadership at national and local level, as well as on the global stage, to make the nation's health secure. UKHSA is an executive agency, sponsored by the [Department of Health and Social Care](#).

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