

## PREVENTING ILLNESS FROM ANIMAL EXHIBITS AND PETTING ZOOS

In the last few years, petting zoos, “pocket pets” (hamsters, mice), reptiles and even county fair animals have been determined to be sources of numerous illness outbreaks of E. coli, Salmonella, and other pathogens. This is especially serious for children under five who could develop Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS), a potentially fatal consequence of E. coli.

Fair-animal related E. coli outbreaks have occurred in Wisconsin, Ohio, North Carolina, and Florida. A journalist in Florida observed the seriousness of this illness in children and wrote that hand wash posters should contain a dire warning cautioning about a deadly bacteria and possible kidney failure (HUS).

Surfaces in facilities used to house animals and later used for a food event have also caused illness. In 2001 a pancake breakfast in a stock pavilion at U.W. Madison caused 34 E.Coli illnesses (1 HUS in a child). Lab test of the railings and animal bedding were positive for E. coli 11 days after the animals left.

Health experts are not advocating that people stop attending animal exhibits, only that they take measures to prevent illness. How can they do that?

- Small children with a strong need to put fingers, pacifiers and toys to the mouth should not be allowed to touch the animals.
- Posters going into animal exhibits could warn people not to bring in food, pacifiers and toys, and not to smoke in animal exhibits.
- Public hand washing stations could be set up between animal areas and food stands.
- Signs could be posted on the way out to remind people to wash hands prior to eating.
- Parents need to make sure that children wash hands prior to eating.
- Facilities previously used for animals should have all bedding removed and fences or railings cleaned and then properly disinfected prior to use for food events.

*Proper hand washing is the single most important tool in preventing illness after touching animals. When washing hands, scrub with warm water and soap for 20 seconds. Hand sanitizers are less effective if there is visible soil and do not remove all potential animal pathogens.*

The Marathon County Health Department has posters available for event organizers, 4-H clubs and petting zoos. We also have a basic fact sheet of safety precautions, disinfection procedures, and ideas for safe petting zoo designs. Teachers may also obtain information about animal safety for the classroom.

Call the Marathon County Health Department at 261-1900 or check out the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians document called “The Compendium of Measures to Prevent Disease Associated with Animals in Public Settings.”

[www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/RR/RR5404.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/RR/RR5404.pdf) Have a safe and healthy summer!

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Kristal Knapp, Guest Health Editorial – “Health Views”*