

This factsheet provides advice to the general public, schools, childcare centres and petting zoo operators on how to minimise the risk of infection from animals through proper hygiene controls and practices.

Petting zoos and personal hygiene

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Introduction

Children are attracted to and enjoy petting animals. Petting zoos are often found at agricultural shows, carnivals, circuses and zoos. "Travelling" pet zoos may also visit preschools and childcare centres. People need to be aware of the potential health risks and how to avoid them when children pet animals.

What are zoonoses?

Zoonoses are diseases that can be passed from animals to humans. Animals may carry a range of germs without showing any signs of disease. Most zoonoses are uncommon and can usually be treated when detected. While there are dozens of zoonotic diseases, there are a few that are particularly dangerous to humans. Zoonoses include *Campylobacter* infection, cryptosporidiosis, salmonellosis, toxin producing *E. coli*, orf, ringworm, Psittacosis, Q fever, hydatids, leptospirosis, lyssavirus, toxoplasmosis and toxocarasis.

How are zoonoses spread?

Diseases can be spread through direct contact with animals and then placing contaminated fingers or other items in the mouth. Diseases can also be spread through animal bites and scratches, contact with their carcasses, or through indirect contact with their faeces, urine, saliva, blood, aerosols, birth products, or enclosures contaminated with these materials. Diseases can also be spread through contaminated dust.

Who is at risk?

Everyone is at risk but particularly those people with weakened immune systems, the elderly, pregnant women, young children and those who are ill.

What precautions can the general public take?

Hand washing is the key. Infectious diseases may be spread from either animals or the environment to people by contaminated hands. Hand washing is one of the most important practices in preventing the spread of disease for visitors to petting zoos. **Always wash hands with soap and running water before eating, drinking or smoking.**

While visiting animals, do not:

- touch mouth with hands, or lick fingers
- eat food intended for animals
- eat
- leave open wounds uncovered
- wipe hands on clothing, if avoidable.

Always wash hands and other exposed body parts with soap and running water, particularly after:

- touching animals, their enclosures or food containers. Any part of the animal or its surrounds can be contaminated with faeces or urine
- being licked, bitten or spat on by animals
- having contact with soil or faeces.

What precautions can preschool and childcare centres take?

Preschool and childcare centres should obtain the informed consent of parents/guardians well before the petting zoo visits. Centre staff (perhaps with the assistance of some parents) should closely supervise children who are petting animals by using the precautions outlined above. Hand washing of the children immediately afterwards should also be closely supervised, ensuring that hand-washed children do not become recontaminated by playing with children who have not washed their hands.

What precautions can petting zoo operators take?

Operators should take precautions to reduce the risk of ill health to visitors of the petting zoo. Operators should assume that all animals carry germs harmful to humans and take appropriate precautions to prevent the spread of disease, by:

- providing only healthy animals for public display or contact by establishing a close association with a vet to ensure animals are clinically healthy, appropriately vaccinated, and maintaining a comprehensive parasite control program for all species
- practising and promoting thorough hand washing with soap and running water after contact with animals or their enclosures
- positioning hand washing facilities so that visitors are encouraged to wash their hands with soap and running water on exiting animal enclosures and before entering designated eating areas
- separating animal contact areas from visitor eating areas
- keeping animals out of visitor eating areas
- providing adequate waste bins for visitors that cannot be raided by animals
- maintaining a first aid kit
- keeping birthing animals out of public areas
- if providing milk or milk products for tasting, only doing so after they have been pasteurised or heat treated
- banning known aggressive animals from coming into direct contact with visitors
- maintaining animals in an environment conducive to maintaining their health and well-being
- reducing stress and overcrowding of animals to reduce the possibility of disease
- regularly removing and appropriately disposing of faeces and other wastes, including birth products
- providing adequate barriers to prevent touching animals that are not available for touching or that should not be touched.

Place obvious and prominent hand washing and directional signs in appropriate locations, such as the entrance or exits of the petting zoo, and in eating areas to remind visitors to:

- use good hygiene practices in the petting zoo environment
- only eat or drink in designated areas, not in animal contact areas. If a petting zoo does not have separate visitor eating and animal contact areas, signs should advise visitors that hands should be thoroughly washed with soap and running water after touching animals and before eating
- wash hands with soap and running water when leaving animal enclosures and before eating.

Further information

[Animal Contact Guideline](#) is an excellent and more detailed publication by the Communicable Disease Control Branch and Environmental Health Branch of the South Australian Department of Human Services.

For further information please call your local public health unit on **1300 066 055**.