



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Wash Your Hands If You Pet That Bunny

Compendium of Measures to Prevent Disease Associated with Animals in Public Settings, 2007

Recorded: July 3, 2007; posted: July 6, 2007

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[Matthew Reynolds] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds.

Most of us have fond memories of going to a petting zoo, having animals in our classroom, or some other close encounter with unusual animals. We can learn valuable lessons from those experiences, and children are often fascinated by the chance to get a closer look at many different animal species a bit more exotic than the average household pet. But did you know that animals can also carry diseases or germs that can infect children and adults who come into contact with them? To keep children – and ourselves – safe from illness or injury, it's important to learn about some basic rules to follow.

Today, we will be talking with Dr. Casey Barton Behravesh, a research scientist with CDC's infectious diseases center. Dr. Barton is one of the experts who recently published a report about health and safety concerns related to animals in public settings, such as petting zoos, schools, wildlife exhibits, and such. And even more important, recommendations for preventing illness or injuries that can occur when visiting these kinds of settings. Dr. Barton, welcome to the show.

[Dr. Barton] Thanks, Matthew. It's a pleasure to be here.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dr. Barton, I imagine that many children and adults enjoy the idea of visiting a petting zoo and being able to get a closer look at animals that they're unlikely to have as household pets, animals like goats or ponies. Some animal exhibits even have rather exotic creatures that we might otherwise never see except in pictures. Even though these are opportunities that can be interesting, are there special hazards or health concerns with these people-animal encounters?

[Dr. Barton] Yes, Matthew. Animals can carry germs that can make people sick. Other health concerns include injuries, such as bites or scratches. Additionally, small children can be knocked over by animals in petting zoos or fall off of ponies on pony rides. There have been an increasing number of infectious disease outbreaks, rabies exposures, and injuries associated with animal exhibit settings in the last 10 years. These infectious disease outbreaks are commonly associated with hand-to-mouth contact, and serious illnesses have occurred, especially in children and others at higher risk. Though there are some risks, the benefits of human-animal contact are very important, and the risks can be minimized in properly supervised and managed settings.

[Matthew Reynolds] What can make people sick when they're visiting these animals?

[Dr. Barton] Animals can carry bacteria, parasites and viruses that can be spread to humans causing illnesses in humans. One bacteria of concern is a type of E. coli. This type of E.coli can cause serious kidney disease, especially in children.

[Matthew Reynolds] For the parents that are listening to our podcasts, I know some of them will probably be wondering, "What can I do to protect my children, as well as myself, when visiting these places?"

[Dr. Barton] Visitors to animal exhibits need to know about the disease and injury risks and how to minimize these risks. One thing adults should do is always closely supervise children around any animals. Other at risk populations, such as the elderly and pregnant women, should take extra care around animal exhibits. People should never eat, drink, or put things into their mouth while visiting an animal exhibit, and the single most important step in preventing human infection from animal exhibit settings is proper hand washing.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dr. Barton, you mentioned hand washing and I know we hear a lot about hand washing in the news. Is there a right way to wash hands when having visited an animal exhibit or a petting zoo?

[Dr. Barton]

Yes. First, you should wash (wet) your hands with running water. Then, you place soap onto your palms and rub the hands together to create a lather; a lather is very important. You need to scrub your hands vigorously for about 20 seconds, or the amount of time it takes to sing the "Happy Birthday" song twice. You hold your hands under the running water to rinse off all the soap, and it's important to dry your hands on a disposable paper towel, not on your clothing. Also, adults should always help children wash their hands. In some cases, soap and water may not be available. If that's the case, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer should be used. But first, you have to remove any visible dirt or contamination on your hands before applying the hand sanitizer so it will be more effective. It's also important to note that hands should be washed with soap and water RIGHT after visiting the animal area, even if you did not touch an animal. Hands should also be washed after going to the bathroom, before eating, before preparing or handling foods, and after removing soiled clothes or shoes.

[Matthew Reynolds] Can the average person tell when visiting these animals if they're sick or have germs that they should be concerned about?

[Dr. Barton] It is impossible for anyone to look at an animal and tell if the animal is carrying these bacteria, viruses, or parasites. An animal can appear completely normal and healthy. Many of these germs don't cause illness in the animals and are a normal part of the animals' gastrointestinal tracts. Also, these animals might shed the germs

only some of the time, such as when they're under stress due to travel or being on display.

[Matthew Reynolds] Is it safe to keep animals in school classrooms?

[Dr. Barton] Matthew, learning from animals is definitely an important part of a child's education, but there are some proper ways to manage animals in a classroom setting. Some animals, such as wild or exotic animals, may not be appropriate in a school setting, and the type of animals that are kept or brought into a classroom should be based on several things, including the age of the children and the type of interaction. And again, all interactions with animals need to be supervised by an adult. Certain animals should never, ever be brought into a classroom setting: no bats; no known dangerous animals, such as tigers or bears; no monkeys or apes; no stray animals, because these stray animals have an unknown health and vaccination history; and no venomous or toxin-producing spiders, frogs, or reptiles.

[Matthew Reynolds] What if someone wants to learn more information about this topic?

[Dr. Barton] To learn more information on ways to protect your health and the health of your children who may be in contact with animals, you can call 1-800-CDC-INFO or go to the CDC web site www.cdc.gov/healthypets. Here, you can find more information about pets and also ways to protect your health around other types of animals.

[Matthew Reynolds] Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today Dr. Barton.

[Dr. Barton] Thanks very much for inviting me, Matthew.

[Matthew Reynolds] That's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

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