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Avoiding infection on farm visits

Advice for the public



This leaflet provides advice for the public on avoiding infection from animals when visiting farms.

Farm visits and risks

Visiting a farm is an enjoyable and educational experience for many people, particularly children. However, such visits can never be free from all risks. Farm animals, even those that look clean and healthy, carry infections that can be harmful to people.

The bacterial infection *Escherichia coli* O157 (known as *E. coli*) is a particular health risk, especially for children under five, as they are more vulnerable to this infection and more likely to develop serious illness once infected.

It should be assumed that all cattle, sheep, goats and deer are carrying *E. coli* O157 even when they appear healthy.

When an animal is infected with *E. coli* O157 the bacteria will be in the animal's droppings and will be on the animal's body, fences and surfaces around the farm. Touching animals, fences and other surfaces can thus lead to infection, as you may pick up *E. coli* O157 bacteria and accidentally pass them to your mouth. It only takes a small number of *E. coli* O157 bacteria to cause infection.

Washing your hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately after you have had contact with animals will reduce the risk of infection.

What to do when visiting a farm

Following the simple rules listed below will help to keep you and your children safe from *E. coli* O157 and other infections that may be found on open farms. Pregnant women need to take particular care and specifically should avoid contact with lambs and their droppings.

- Do not put hands on faces or fingers in mouths while petting animals or walking round the farm
- Do not kiss farm animals nor 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 *E. coli* O157 that is in dirt.
- Do wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after you have touched animals, fences or other surfaces in animal areas.
- Do wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before eating or drinking.
- Do wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after removing dirty shoes or boots that have been worn on the farm.
- Do supervise children closely to ensure that they wash their hands thoroughly.
- Do eat and drink in picnic areas or cafes only.

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

If you or anyone in your group has sickness or diarrhoea within two weeks of visiting a farm, contact your GP or call NHS Direct on 0845 4647 as soon as possible. If you or anyone in your group, particularly a young child, has bloody diarrhoea, seek immediate emergency medical attention.

Children under five should not attend school/nursery/group childcare until they have been free of sickness or diarrhoea for two days. Tests may be required to confirm that a child is free from infection.

Parents should confirm with their health professional whether it is safe for them to return before the child returns to school or nursery.

Where can I get more information?

Further information on *E. coli* O157 is available on the Health Protection Agency website at: www.hpa.org.uk

Information for teachers on taking children on farm visits is available on the Health and Safety Executive website at: www.hse.gov.uk