

## **Avoid zoo fever**

*To avoid bringing home your own secret colony of bacteria, take a few precautions at petting zoo*

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With their front hooves propped up on the fence, the goats boosted themselves high enough to get their heads over the fence and their mouths into the palms of the boys' hands, where the prized crackers waited to be licked up and devoured.

When the crackers were gone, the students wiped their hands on their pants, ready to move on to the next exhibit.

Whoa, hold on, though. There was something they had to do first.

"Wash your hands, guys," shouted Mike Lindsey, who was helping to supervise the Crouse Elementary School class visiting the Akron Zoo last week.

"I've heard about the scare of E. coli at (petting zoos)," Lindsey said, "and the importance of washing your hands."

True enough, a recent federal study covering 1990 to 2000 blamed petting zoos and fairs in more than two dozen outbreaks of Escherichia coli O157:H7 -- usually referred to as E. coli -- which can cause severe diarrhea, abdominal cramps, and in about 2 percent to 7 percent of cases, life-threatening kidney complications.

Children under 5 and the elderly are most susceptible to the infections.

Just last month, the Florida Department of Health found a "definitive link" between an outbreak of 26 E. coli O157:H7 infections and petting zoo animals at three central Florida fairs, while it continues to investigate 42 more suspected cases.

Last year in North Carolina, more than 100 people, mostly children, were infected by E. coli at the state fair.

Two E. coli outbreaks in 2000 -- resulting in 56 illnesses and 19 hospitalizations in Pennsylvania and Washington -- led the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to establish recommendations for preventing the disease when people come in contact with animals.

### **Wash hands**

The main recommendation is a simple one -- wash your hands.

The CDC suggests that you scrub your hands vigorously with soap and water (preferably hot water) for at least 20 seconds.

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are effective against many organisms, including E. coli, if soap and water are not available. However, the CDC says, hand sanitizers are not effective against bacterial spores, Cryptosporidium and some viruses. Hand sanitizers are also less effective when hands are visibly dirty.

The CDC also recommends:

Supervise children closely at petting zoos and fairs, making sure to discourage hand-to-mouth contact.

Do not take food or beverages, toys, pacifiers, baby bottles or sippy cups into the animal contact areas.

Fairs and zoos should limit access to animal areas, with hand-washing stations at the gates and in food

concession areas.

As visitors enter the Akron Zoo's petting zoo area, they're greeted with a Purrell dispenser, soap, water, paper towels and signs like "Wash your hands before you leave, Partner."

"It's not rocket science -- if you wash your hands, you're fine," said David Barnhardt, the zoo's marketing director. "It's just a matter of getting them to do that. We certainly can't force them, but we can strongly encourage them to do it."

"If it's up to the kids, they'll run on to the next thing."

#### Hidden risks

Sometimes, though, the risk is hidden. Consider what happened at the Medina County Fair in 2000, when 27 Northeast Ohioans were sickened by E. coli-contaminated water and ice used by vendors. The problem occurred when water near the cattle barn was siphoned into the water lines by hoses left lying in puddles. Washing their hands after petting the cows wouldn't have helped them at all.

"So what do we do?" asked Seattle attorney Bill Marler of the Marler Clark firm, which files lawsuits nationwide related to bacterial illness. "Banish the county fair? Close down petting zoos?"

No, he said. But state legislatures should pass laws requiring hand-washing stations, signs explaining the threat of E. coli and other pathogens and the risk to small children, sanitary walkways and railings, ventilation in buildings to reduce airborne contamination, and a ban of food sales near areas where there is contact with animals.

Only Pennsylvania has passed such legislation.

"Perhaps these laws won't eliminate the risk to public health," he said, "but for a minimal investment, organizers can reduce the risk of sending kids to the hospital -- or worse."