NSW Health

Staying safe around pets and animals

Factsheet

You can help stop the spread of diseases from animals to humans by maintaining good hygiene and staying safe around animals, including pets.

This factsheet shares how to reduce the risk of diseases spreading from animals to humans. It is for:

- pet owners (including owners of aquarium animals such as reptiles and fish)
- petting zoo and animal exhibition operators
- people involved in hiring or organising animal displays, including in schools and childcare centres.

What are zoonoses?

Zoonoses, or zoonotic diseases, are diseases that can spread from animals to humans. Animals may carry germs without showing any signs of being sick. However, some of these germs may be harmful to humans.

There are many zoonoses and they can usually be treated.

Some zoonoses can cause serious illness in humans, including:

- **Salmonellosis:** can spread from animals including reptiles, fish, cattle (cows), sheep, horses, pigs, and poultry (for example, chickens).
- **Leptospirosis:** can spread from cows (including dairy herds), rodents, pigs, dogs, sheep, and goats.
- **Psittacosis:** may be spread by breathing in dried droppings, secretions, or dust from feathers of infected birds. There is also evidence of spread to humans from horses.
- **Q Fever:** may be spread by cows, sheep and goats, kangaroos, domestic pets (dogs and cats) and other wildlife.
- **Cryptosporidiosis:** may be spread by cows and other domestic animals, especially calves and lambs.

Read more about zoonoses at: Zoonoses - Infectious diseases (nsw.gov.au)

Who is at risk of zoonoses?

Everyone can be at risk of zoonoses.

People who spend a lot of time with animals may be at increased risk of getting sick if they

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do not maintain good hygiene. This includes people with pets or those who work with animals, for example people who exhibit animals or run petting zoos, or people who work in the livestock or animal production industry.

People most at risk of severe illness from zoonoses are:

- people with weakened immune systems
- older adults
- pregnant women
- young children.

How are zoonoses spread?

Zoonotic diseases can spread from animals to humans through:

- animal bites or scratches
- contact with an infected animal's faeces (poo), urine (wee), saliva, blood or birth products (including placenta, umbilical cord). Contact might be through touching, or breathing droplets.
- contact with carcasses (dead animals)
- breathing contaminated dust, drinking contaminated water or touching surfaces in enclosures where infected animals are living
- insect bites, such as mosquito bites.

How are zoonoses prevented?

Hand washing is one of the most important ways to stop the spread of zoonoses.

Always wash your hands with soap and running water before and after touching animals. It is very important to wash hands before eating, drinking, or touching your mouth.

To reduce the risk of getting diseases from animals, including your own pets:

- keep pets up to date with appropriate vaccinations
- do not eat food intended for animals
- cover any open wounds before touching your pet or animal, its food, or its surroundings. If you can't cover an open wound it is best to avoid contact with animals
- wear gloves to avoid direct contact with enclosures, including enclosure surfaces and materials (or use nets for aquariums)
- watch out for signs of illness in your pet and contact the vet if they are sick
- handle sick or dead animals with extra care as they may carry diseases.

What are common symptoms of zoonoses?

Symptoms of zoonoses can be different for each disease. Symptoms can last between a few days to months depending on the disease and how severe it is.

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Common symptoms include:

- fever
- stomach cramps
- headaches
- diarrhoea
- nausea
- vomiting.

If you have any of these symptoms, please contact your doctor or Health Direct on **1800 022 222** (available 24 hours) and a nurse will answer your call.

How are zoonoses treated?

Treatment for zoonoses varies depending on the illness.

If you have symptoms of zoonoses, please contact your doctor or Health Direct on **1800 022 222** (available 24 hours) and a nurse will answer your call.

You should follow the advice given to you by your doctor.

What do petting zoo operators and animal exhibitors need to do to keep visitors safe?

Petting zoo operators and animal exhibitors should take precautions to reduce the risk of disease in animals and its spread to visitors.

To prevent the spread of disease to visitors, operators should:

- ensure animals are clinically healthy and appropriately vaccinated
- practise and promote hand washing with soap and running water after contact with animals or their enclosures
- position hand washing facilities so that visitors are encouraged to wash their hands with soap and running water when they exit animal enclosures or before they eat
- have a comprehensive parasite control program for all species
- separate animal contact areas from visitor eating areas and make sure animals are not in the visitor eating areas
- provide plenty of rubbish bins for visitors. These bins should be tightly sealed to stop animals being attracted to the food
- maintain a first aid kit
- keep birthing animals out of public areas
- if relevant, only give milk or milk products for tasting after they have been pasteurised or heat treated
- keep aggressive animals away from visitor areas
- make sure animal enclosures are appropriately maintained, cleaned and are not overcrowded. This helps to reduce stress in animals and reduce the risk of disease.

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- regularly remove and appropriately dispose faeces and other wastes, including birth products
- provide adequate barriers to prevent people touching animals that are not available for touching or that should not be touched.

What precautions can preschool and childcare centres take?

Children should be closely watched when in contact with animals to prevent the animals from licking their faces and hands. Infants under one year of age should not be allowed to touch animals or their enclosures.

Caretakers should be prepared with allergic medicines for people who are allergic to animals. Centre staff should watch that exhibitors are following the guidelines above and ensure adequate hygiene is maintained.

For additional guidance on safety around petting zoos and exhibition animals for childcare centres and preschools, please visit the recommended websites.

- National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC): Staying Healthy; preventing infectious diseases in early childhood education and care services.
- NSW Department of Education: Animals in schools.

What is the public health response?

If you get a zoonotic disease, your local Public Health Unit can provide further advice on treatment and how to stop the spread of disease. This may include advice on staying home from work and school.

Some zoonoses are notifiable conditions for which the Public Health Unit may contact you to discuss where you came into contact with the disease.

For further information please call your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055

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 guidance related to wildlife see:

- Be careful around wildlife

Further information related to exhibiting animals is available at:

- NSW Department of Primary Industry; General Standards for Exhibiting Animals in New South Wales
- NSW Department of Primary Industry; Standards for Exhibiting Animals at Mobile Establishments in New South Wales

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