



Public Health
England

News Release

For immediate release: 24 June
2013

Reminder for Londoners to practise good hand hygiene at petting farms

Public Health England (PHE) is reminding Londoners to practise good hand hygiene when visiting farm attractions over the summer months following a number of outbreaks of diarrhoeal illness this year in other parts of the country.

There have been twelve outbreaks of cryptosporidium infection associated with petting farms in other parts of England affecting around 130 people between January and May 2013. Over the past 20 years, an average of around 80 cases* of cryptosporidium linked to visiting petting farms have been reported to PHE each year. This is out of a total of around two million visits to the 1,000 plus farm attractions in the UK. Some very popular farms can be found in some unexpected urban London areas, where fortunately there have been no reported outbreaks.

Cryptosporidium is only one of a number of bugs that can be picked up during a visit to a petting farm. Other common infections are caused by *E. coli* and *Salmonella*.

All of these bacteria live in the gut of the animals so people can get infected at farms mainly in two ways – either by touching animals in the petting and feeding areas or by coming into contact with animal droppings on contaminated surfaces around the farm. These harmful bacteria can get accidentally passed to your mouth by putting hands on faces, or fingers in mouths, before washing them thoroughly. It only takes a small number of the bacteria to cause infection.

Dr Yvonne Doyle, regional director for PHE London, said: “Visiting a farm is a very enjoyable experience for both children and adults alike and there are some great community-run farms in London, but it’s important to remember that contact with farm animals carries a risk of infection because of the germs they naturally carry.

“The outbreaks of illness in other parts of the country serve as a reminder for Londoners visiting a petting farm locally, or further afield, of the need to wash their hands thoroughly using soap and water after they have handled animals or been in their surroundings - particularly before eating. Although we can avoid obvious dirt there will be millions of invisible bacteria spread all around the farm which can get onto our hands.

“Ahead of the seasonal rise in cases of *E. coli* linked to petting farms we want to remind people not to rely on hand gels and wipes for protection because these are not suitable against the sort of germs found on farms. Children should also be closely supervised to ensure they wash their hands properly, as they are more at risk of serious illness.”

“By being aware and by doing these simple things we can help to avoid illness and enjoy a fun day out.”

Owners and managers of farm attractions are also strongly recommended to make use of the guidance from the Health and Safety Executive on how to protect visitors and staff from illness, to ensure they are doing enough to comply with the law. Teachers and others who organise visits for children at farm attractions should be encouraged to read the guidance aimed at them and farms should ensure that they have adequate signage reminding visitors about the important of hand washing after touching the animals or their surfaces.

Ends

Notes to editors

1. Cryptosporidium is a parasite that can be found in soil, water, food or on any surface that has been contaminated with human or animal faeces. The symptoms of cryptosporidiosis are typically watery diarrhoea and stomach pains. There is no specific treatment for the illness which is usually self-limiting, although it is important that anyone with the illness keeps hydrated.
2. Cases of *E. coli* linked to farm attractions are at their highest levels between June and October. An infection with *E. coli* can lead to mild gastrointestinal illness or in serious cases it can cause bloody diarrhoea which can lead to severe illness .
3. *Data from review of 55 outbreaks of intestinal disease at petting farms between 1992 and 2009. Gormley et al (2011). Transmission of *Cryptosporidium spp.* at petting farms, England and Wales. *Emerging Infectious Diseases* http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/17/1/10-0902_article.html.
4. The Health Protection Agency (a forebear of Public Health England), Department of Health and Defra have jointly produced a leaflet for the public on how to enjoy farm visits safely: ‘Avoiding infection on farm visits http://www.hpa.org.uk/webc/HPAwebFile/HPAweb_C/1270122184581

A summary of the guidance found in the leaflet is as follows:

- 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 remove and clean boots or shoes that might have become soiled and clean pushchair wheels. Then wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water.
- Do supervise children closely to ensure that they wash their hands thoroughly.
- Do eat and drink in picnic areas or cafes only.

5. Updated guidance from the Health and Safety Executive for owners and managers of farm attractions was published in 2011. '*Preventing or controlling ill health from animal contact at visitor attractions – Industry Code of Practice*' can be found here <http://www.face-online.org.uk/codeofpractice>

Common infections linked to farm visits

E. coli is a bacteria that is commonly found in the intestines of most people and animals. There are many different types of *E. coli* and while many live harmlessly in the gut, some such as O157 cause illness. Information on *E. coli* can be found here:

<http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/EscherichiaColiO157/PatientCarer/>

Cryptosporidium is a parasite that is found in soil, food, water, or surfaces that have been contaminated with infected human or animal faeces. People may also be infected by consuming contaminated water or food, or by swimming in contaminated water (for example in lakes or rivers). Infection is frequently associated with foreign travel. Information on cryptosporidium can be found here:

<http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/Cryptosporidium/GeneralInformation/cryptofactsheetCryptosporidium/>

Salmonella bacteria live in the gut of many farm animals and can affect meat, eggs, poultry, and milk. More information on salmonella can be found here:

<http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/Salmonella/GeneralInformation/salFAQs/>

Public Health England is a new executive agency of the Department of Health that took up its full responsibilities on 1 April, 2013. PHE works with national and local government, industry and the NHS to protect and improve the nation's health and support healthier choices and will be addressing inequalities by focusing on removing barriers to good health. To find out more visit our website www.gov.uk/phe, follow us on Twitter: @PHE_London

Issued by:

Public Health England

London press office

Tel: 020 7811 7243 / 7242

Out of hours telephone: 020 8200 4400

Email: london-pressoffice@phe.gov.uk