

March 12, 2010

Dear 4-H Parent;

Cases of diarrhea diseases are occurring in 4-H children every year, and farm animals (particularly dairy calves) have been linked to these illnesses in children. Many cases are mild, but some are severe enough to require hospitalization. Since gut bacteria and parasites from animals can cause serious illness in children, please take this time to educate your 4-H child about the hazards and preventative measures needed while attending their animals.



How do people get sick from calves?

- Even normal healthy animals can carry human enteric pathogens (disease causing germs in the intestines or gut).
- The primary way to spread enteric pathogens is the fecal-oral route (hands soiled by animal feces put into mouth during eating or normal hand to mouth activity).
- Animal fur, hair, skin, and saliva often carry fecal organisms (germs) so spread of disease can occur when persons pet, touch, feed, or are licked by animals.
- Transmission has also been linked to contaminated water sources, animal bedding, flooring, barriers, feed, water and milk buckets, other environmental surfaces, and contaminated clothing and shoes.
- Illness has resulted from fecal contamination of food, which happens when handwashing is neglected prior to eating and preparing food after contact with animals or contaminated surfaces.

How can we tell if our calves are contagious?

- Animals carrying disease causing germs may appear healthy.
- They can shed the organisms (germs) intermittently and contaminate the environment around them.
- Some pathogens live for months or years in the environment, so infection can occur even after the animals are gone.
- Treating animals with antibiotics cannot reliably eliminate infection, prevent shedding, or protect against reinfection. In addition, treating animals with antibiotics can prolong shedding of certain organisms and contribute to the inability for antibiotics to work if over used.
- Contact your veterinarian for more information on keeping your calves healthy.

What factors increase the risk of disease transmission in 4-H calves?

- Animals are more likely to shed pathogens when stressed by prolonged transportation, confinement, crowding, and increased handling.
- Frequent mixing of animal groups increases the probability that animals will infect each other.

- Young animals can have more disease causing pathogens in their gut than adult animals and children are more likely to interact with “baby” animals.

What behaviors increase the risk of infection in children?

- Lack of awareness of the risk for disease.
- Inadequate or infrequent hand washing
- Lack of close supervision
- Hand-to-mouth activities (including eating without washing hands).
- Children are particularly attracted to animals and children also have increased risk for serious infections.

How can I decrease the risk of infection to children?

- Provide adequate handwashing facilities in animal barns.
- Hand washing! Do not use hand sanitizers. Hot soapy water is best. .
- Provide adult supervision of children.
- Discourage children from placing their fingers in their mouth.
- Reduce contact with sick animals.
- Remove animal feces (“poop”) regularly and change animal bedding often.
- Do not taste animal food.
- Keep animals clean and fed properly.
- Each calf or group of calves should have it’s own feed and water pans which are not shared with other livestock. These should be cleaned regularly.
- Remove shoes and other clothing (i.e. gloves, coats, etc.) before entering the home.
- Wash surfaces that could be contaminated often. Cryptosporidium is resistant to chlorine disinfection so it is tougher to kill than most disease-causing organisms.

When is it important to wash your hands?

- After removing footwear and barn clothing
- Before preparing or eating food
- After handling animals or their feed
- After contact with animal environment
- After using the restroom
- Anytime time hands become soiled

Contact with animals provides opportunities for entertainment and education. Please work with the health district to promote an understanding of ways to spread disease and animal behavior so we can decrease the likelihood of infectious diseases among persons, especially children.

Thank you,

Carolyn Gillam, RN, Infectious Disease