



Long Beach Island Health Department

Petting Zoos



Petting zoos may seem like a harmless way to let your child get close to farm animals, but direct contact with these animals is becoming an increasingly common cause of infection and illness for children.

E. coli bacteria, the cause of these infections, are found naturally in the stomach and intestine of people and animals, and most forms of the bug are harmless. But some strains, such as *E. coli* 0157:H7, can cause illness or even death.

Outbreaks of *E. coli* 0157:H7, linked to fairs, petting zoos, and other events that bring people in close contact with animals, are occurring almost on a yearly basis. Young children are more likely than most people to get diseases from animals; they may touch a contaminated surface and put their hands in their mouth before washing.

The *Centers for Disease Control* offer the following tips to protect infants and young children from getting sick while handling animals:

- Find out where hand-washing stations are located.
- Always wash your hands after petting animals or touching the animal enclosure, especially before eating and drinking.
- Running water and soap are best. Use hand gels if running water and soap are not available.
- Keep food and drinks out of animal areas.
- Do not share your food with animals.
- Do not eat or drink raw (unpasteurized) dairy products.
- Children younger than 5 years old need supervision
- Never allow children to put their hands or objects (For example: pacifiers) in their mouth while interacting with animals.
- Hand washing should be supervised.

The *Department of Veterinary Science at Pennsylvania State University* also advises bringing a change of clothes. A jacket can become contaminated when a child leans on a railing; shoelaces dragging in the mud can transport bacteria back home. Have children change their clothes after petting the animals, not to be worn again until they have been washed in hot, soapy water. And finally, watch for symptoms. If your child does become ill soon after visiting a petting zoo or farm, call a doctor. This can save valuable time in

making a diagnosis. Pay close attention to any possible signs of infection for a week or so after your trip.

Sources: Food Protection Report-December 2004 Vol. 20 No. 12, CDC-Healthy Pets, Healthy People, WebMD-Kids and Petting Zoos