

Health Hazards of Petting Zoos

Factsheet

Children who visit petting zoos often bring home more than their parents bargained for. Health officials indicate that petting zoos are hotbeds of serious pathogens, including *E. coli* and salmonella bacteria. Numerous children have been severely sickened as a result of visiting animal displays, and some have even died. Those who come in contact with *E. coli* can develop bloody diarrhea, anemia, chronic kidney failure, or neurological impairments such as seizures or strokes. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), kidney failure can occur, and dialysis and transfusions are sometimes necessary. Some who are sickened by *E. coli* bacteria must undergo surgery to have part of the bowel removed. Petting zoos across the United States have been responsible for sickening visitors—most of them children. The CDC also reports that every year, tens of thousands of cases of salmonella, more than 2,000 *E. coli*-related illnesses, and scores of deaths from *E. coli* infections are the result of casual animal contact. Experts warn that infections can spread through direct or even indirect animal contact; the area surrounding the animal's cage can be teeming with bacteria, and children can even bring it home on their clothing.

October 2005: Fresno County California officials cited the Big Fresno Fair's petting zoo as a possible source of the *E. coli* infections contracted by six children. One of them, a 2-year-old, had to be hospitalized in critical condition and required dialysis.

July 2005: Two children were hospitalized with *E. coli* infections following a visit to a petting zoo in Arizona. One child came into direct contact with the animals in the petting zoo; the second child may have touched railings around the animals' enclosures. Fecal samples from the zoo yielded *E. coli*, leading zoo officials to close the zoo as well as the adjoining play area.

June 25, 2005: The children's petting zoo at the Toledo Zoo was closed indefinitely after three animals tested positive for campylobacter, an infectious bacteria that causes gastrointestinal illness.

April 8, 2005: An outbreak of *E. coli* bacteria in Florida was definitively linked to animals from petting zoos at three fairs. Twenty-six people were confirmed stricken with the *E. coli* infection, including 23 children. Epidemiologists matched DNA from *E. coli* bacteria in six animals -- two goats, two sheep and two cows - - to the DNA in the bacteria contracted by the victims. The six animals were all from the same company, Ag-Venture Farm Shows.

December 16, 2004: State health officials reported 43 confirmed cases of *E. coli* and suspected 108 more cases in people who had visited a petting zoo at the North Carolina state fair.

September 9, 2004: Although vaccinated, a horse in the Phoenix Zoo's petting area died of West Nile disease. A bird at the zoo died of the same disease earlier in the year. No vaccination is available for

humans to prevent the mosquito-borne virus.

August 5, 2004: The Fossil Rim Wildlife Center was placed on quarantine by the Texas Health Department after a sheep in its petting zoo died of rabies. Two children had to undergo painful rabies treatment. Health officials stated that the disease can be transmitted through saliva (e.g., when an infected animal licks a person's face or an area where there are fresh wounds or broken skin). Transmission also can occur if a person kisses an infected animal on the face or lips. Officials asked that zoo visitors contact them for possible treatment.

August 20, 2004: Canadian health officials issued a warning after six children became ill with suspected *E. coli* infections after visiting petting zoos in British Columbia. The British Columbia Centre for Disease Control warned that children under the age of six are especially vulnerable to complications

from *E. coli* infections associated with close contact with animals in petting zoos.

November 7, 2003: A 3-year-old girl and a 79-year-old man died after a 1999 outbreak of *E. coli* at the Washington County Fair outside Albany, New York. About 1,079 people were infected and 65 were hospitalized. In 2003, a class action lawsuit filed by 122 victims was settled for \$4 million.

September 10, 2003: Twenty-two people were hospitalized, including 12 children who developed kidney failure, after being infected with *E. coli* at the 2002 Lane County Fair in Eugene, Oregon. It was thought that the bacteria made contact with visitors' hands by way of the dust in the sheep barn. Eighty-two people were sickened.

August 16, 2003: The Philadelphia Zoo closed two petting areas after two children, ages 3 and 5, who visited the zoo came down with *E. coli* infections and had to be hospitalized.

August 27, 2002: An *E. coli* outbreak in Oregon, the largest in state history, sickened as many as 42 people who visited animal displays at a county fair. Four children were hospitalized, including three who had to be put in intensive care.

July 23, 2002: Three children had to receive kidney dialysis after being infected with *E. coli*. Health officials suspect that the children were infected after visiting a New Zealand petting zoo.

January 23, 2002: A 4-year-old girl had to undergo a kidney

transplant after contracting *E. coli* at a petting zoo in the Philadelphia area. The girl was one of 16 children sickened in the fall of 2000 after visiting the facility. The girl's parents have sued the owners of the petting zoo.

October 25, 2001: An *E. coli* outbreak at an Ohio county fair sickened 41 people.

August 16, 2001: At least 25 people, including two children who became gravely ill, were sickened by *E. coli* infections after visiting a county fair in Wisconsin. Two hundred people reported symptoms associated with the outbreak.

July 27, 2001: After an *E. coli* outbreak sickened 67 children at a petting zoo in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, the Bethlehem Health Department issued strict regulations for petting zoos, including a prohibition on direct contact with animals.

July 2001: In response to the CDC's report on *E. coli* outbreaks at petting zoos, the New York state Department of Agriculture issued recommendations for petting zoos, including the recommendation that hand-washing stations be made available to patrons, in an attempt to increase safety. The same month, the Washington State Department of Health also developed guidelines for petting zoos.

April 20, 2001: The CDC reported in its *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* that 56 people, mostly school-children—19 of whom were hospitalized—were sickened with *E. coli* after visiting two petting zoos—one in

Washington state and one in Pennsylvania.

April 19, 2001: An Associated Press article stated that "about 70,000 cases of *E. coli* infection are reported in the U.S. annually, about 100 of them fatal. Transmission usually comes through food and water, but exposure to animals is also a significant risk."

November 7, 2000: As many as 21 children were infected with *E. coli* after visiting a Pennsylvania petting zoo. Two children, ages 3 and 4, had to be put on kidney dialysis. The petting zoo operators' 4-day-old son died two months earlier from a different strain of *E. coli*.

June 9, 2000: Four children became sick from *E. coli* after visiting a Washington petting zoo. Another contracted *E. coli* from a sibling who had visited the zoo.

August 30, 1999: As many as 650 people may have been exposed to rabies after having contact with a bear cub at an Iowa petting zoo. Several of these people had to undergo rabies vaccines. The bear cub later died of the disease.

April 8, 1999: A Michigan petting zoo was sued after a 5-year-old child became ill from a salmonella infection after visiting the facility with his school. The child's mother reported that the child lost 8 pounds and had to be hospitalized. Seven children from another school were sickened with salmonella after a trip to the same petting zoo.

March 24, 1996: At least 50 people were stricken with a particularly virulent type of salmonella after visiting a

petting area at the Denver Zoo. | hospitalized.
Eight of the victims had to be