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What Kind of a Nose is a Zoonose?

While it sounds like the title of a new Dr. Seuss book, zoonoses are diseases, sometimes life threatening, spread from animals to humans. There are over 75 such diseases that we are currently aware of in this country, according to the Humane Society of the United States.

Petting zoos are a popular way to introduce children to farm animals and have always been a wonderful photo opportunity for parents, but even these are not without risks. In 2000, there was an outbreak of E. coli in Pennsylvania traced to a petting zoo. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that 55 cases were confirmed and 16 people hospitalized. A four-year-old girl required a kidney transplant from her father.

Because of outbreaks from petting zoos, the CDC has issued safety guidelines for these attractions. The final recommendations are posted under "Outbreak Reports and Publications" at http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/outbreak/recomm_farm_animal.htm. The CDC estimates that each year, 73,000 people become ill and 61 die from E. coli infections. Not all of these cases are due to animal contact; some occur because of contaminated food or water.

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Young children are more susceptible to infection and are at greater risk because of their tendency to hug and kiss pets and allowing animals to lick their hands and faces. It is necessary to have hand-washing facilities close to petting areas to minimize the risk to children.

Reptile pets can also pose a risk. Lizards and turtles with shells less than 4" are known to carry salmonella, a bacterium that is difficult to kill. For this reason, the Food and Drug Administration prohibits the sale of small turtles. Sometimes, pet stores will carry them and have customers sign a disclaimer stating that they are for educational uses, not as pets. Ferrets and hamsters also may not be suitable for homes with young children.

The spread of diseases from animals to humans depend on a variety of conditions:

- Weather — animals in warmer climates will be more affected by insects and parasites which can also attack humans.
- Pet health — regular veterinarian visits and up-to-date shots are essential.
- Immune compromised people — such as cancer patients, are at greater risk and need to maintain pet health.

The best way to ensure safety for adults and children is thorough hand-washing with soap and water for about 20 seconds. Games can be played with children by singing the ABC song twice so they know how long to wash with the soap. Hand sanitizers have not shown to be as effective as soap and water.

If you are bitten or scratched by a dog or cat, wash the area well with soap and water, and watch for signs of redness which would indicate infection. Antibiotics may be needed. Dog bites may look worse but they are generally less serious than cat bites, which more readily cause infection.

A healthy pet is a wonderful companion for children and adults alike. No matter how bad a day you have had, they are glad to see you and give you emotional support and comfort, but let's make sure that's *all* they give you.

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For more information on this and other health, money management, food, nutrition or parenting issues, contact the MSU Extension office. MSU Extension Family and Consumer Science educators are located in all 83 Michigan counties to integrate university and community resources to help families succeed.

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