

Health and safety on farm visits

A new industry code of practice *Preventing or controlling ill health from animal contact at visitor attractions* now replaces previous advice from Scottish Government, Health Protection Scotland and HSE.

Farm visits can be of significant educational value. They allow pupils to see at first hand where their food comes from (the so called 'farm to plate' message), consider issues such as care, respect and welfare of living things and to experience risk assessment in a real life setting.



Advice on Health and Safety during school visits to farms is provided by the Scottish Government [1]. However the sources of advice to which that guidance refers have now been deleted from the Scottish Government website as it has been from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and Health and Safety

Executive (HSE) websites. Suitable advice on these matters is now provided by the Farming and Countryside Education (FACE) Industry Code of Practice *Preventing or controlling ill health from animal contact at visitor attractions* [2].

All animals naturally carry a range of microorganisms, some of which can be transmitted to humans, where they may cause ill health. It is uncommon for visitors to farms or other animal attractions to become ill as a result of their visit. The transmission of harmful microorganisms from animals to humans is most commonly through the hand to mouth route from contact with animal faeces or saliva. Thus the control measures to prevent transmission depend on breaking the transmission pathway by: maintaining a clean site to avoid contact with faeces, preventing contact with animals (by double fencing for example) and by effective hand washing and hygiene (Figure 1).

Where there are specific controlled areas where animals may be handled or fed, the principle control measure to prevent transmission is effective hand washing/hygiene. Here soap, running water and disposable paper towels is the preferred means of hand washing. Wipes and hand gels are **not** an acceptable substitute for proper hand washing. Young children may require close supervision or assistance during hand washing to ensure it is carried out in a hygienic manner. Young children may also require sufficient supervision to ensure they avoid hand to mouth contact while having intentional contact with animals. It should be borne in mind that *E. coli* 0157 (a microorganism that may be found in farm animals) is particularly serious in children under 5 years.

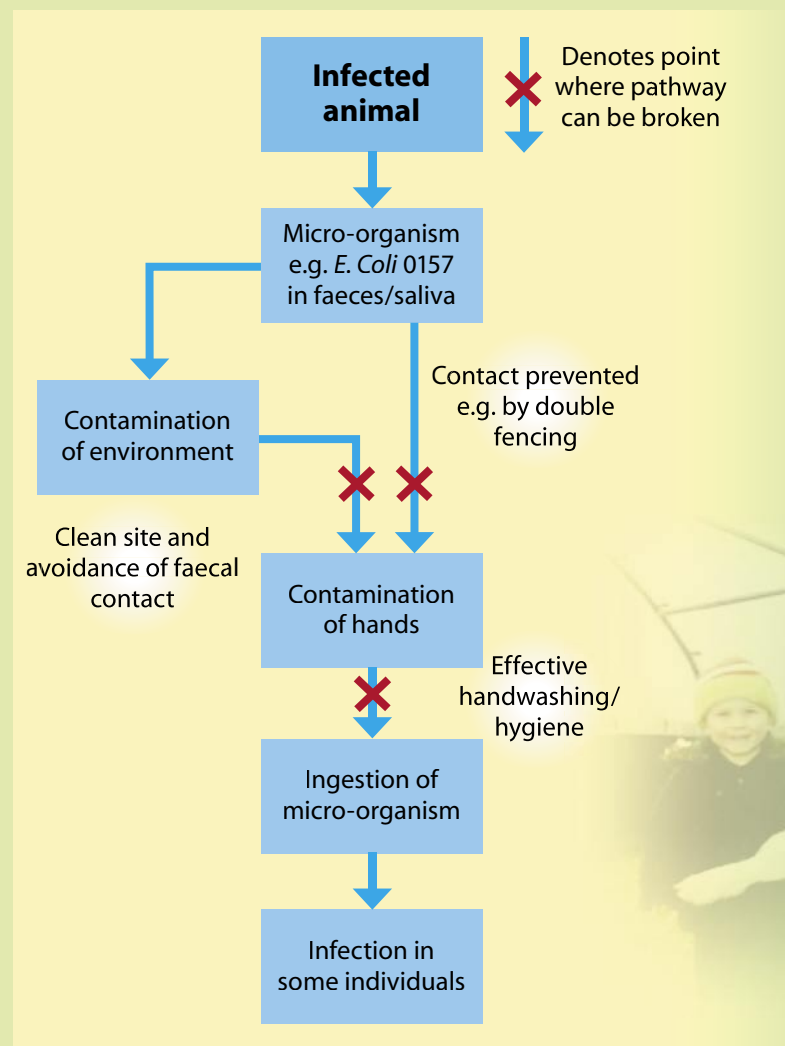


Figure 1 - Risk pathway for microorganisms.

As with many other educational or recreational activities, visits can never be considered free from all risk. However, while the hazards are real, the risk of infection in children can be readily controlled by simple everyday measures. In Scotland it is wise to arrange such visits through the Royal Highland Educational Trust (RHET) Countryside Initiative Project Coordinator [3]. Even if you have a local farm happy to accommodate a school visit it would be wise to arrange for the farmer and RHET to make contact to ensure that suitable arrangements are put in place for a visit. RHET works with volunteer farmers to facilitate free, fully risk-assessed Farm Visits.

There is a shared responsibility between the farmer or visitor attraction and the visiting school for risk assessment. Although the host farm or attraction will put control measures in place, it is important that the teacher knows what they are, judge if they are suitable based on the Industry Code of Practice, and inform, instruct and supervise children so that they comply with the control measures. If a farm visit is arranged through the local RHET coordinator, a pre-visit 'walk through' of the visit will be arranged where risk assessment can be discussed along with the desired educational outcomes for the visit. Further details are available through the RHET web site [3].

Before your visit, you should:

- Read and understand the advice in the industry Code of Practice, and discuss arrangements for the visit with the management at the site.
- Confirm that the control measures provided at the site match the recommendations in the industry Code of Practice.
- Seek advice from your local authority/employer on what the appropriate ratio of pupils to teachers/adults should be.
- Discuss and agree with staff/parents/helpers their roles and responsibilities during the visit. In particular, they must understand the need to make sure that the children wash, or are helped to wash, their hands thoroughly after contacting animals and before eating.

Key points to cover with the children should include:

- Explaining the rules for the visit, stressing that they must not eat, drink or chew anything (including sweets) outside the areas in which you permit them to do so.
- Explaining why they must wash their hands thoroughly after contact with the animals, and before eating or drinking anything.
- Demonstrating how to wash their hands properly.
- Discussing the requirements for appropriate clothing, including suitable footwear. Sandals are not suitable and Wellingtons may be required (or supplied).
- Checking that cuts, grazes etc. on children's hands are covered with a waterproof dressing.

During and after the visit, make sure that the children:

- Are reminded of the rules/precautions to take upon arrival at the site.
- Do not kiss animals.
- Always wash their hands thoroughly before and after eating, after any contact with animals and again before leaving the site.
- Eat only food that they have brought with them or food for human consumption that they have bought on the premises, in designated areas.
- Never eat food that has fallen to the ground.
- Never taste animal foods.
- Do not suck fingers or put hands, pens, pencils or crayons etc. in mouths.
- Where practical and possible, clean or change their footwear before leaving. Facilities may be provided for this e.g. disinfectant footbaths.
- Wash their hands after changing their footwear.

Check that the children stay in their allocated groups during the visit, and that they:

- Do not use or pick up tools (e.g. spades and forks) or touch other work equipment unless permitted to do so by site staff.
- Do not climb on to walls, fences, gates or animal pens etc.
- Listen carefully and follow the instructions and information given by the site staff.
- Approach and handle animals quietly and gently.
- Do not chase, frighten or torment the animals.
- Do not wander off into unsupervised or prohibited areas e.g. manure heaps.

Remember the children are your responsibility during the visit:

- You should supervise them during the visit, especially during hand washing to make sure that each child washes thoroughly. Site staff may be able to help with this supervision.
- Allow plenty of time for hand washing before eating or leaving the site so that the children do not have to rush.

References

- [1] Health and Safety on Educational Excursions - Farm Visits, The Scottish Government, 2004. Available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/12/20444/489523> (accessed 17th June 2013).
- [2] Preventing or controlling ill health from animal contact at visitor attractions - Industry Code of Practice, Farming and Countryside Education, 2012. Available at <http://www.face-online.org.uk/codeofpractice> (accessed 21st June 2013).
- [3] Farm Visits, The Royal Highland Education Trust. Available at <http://www.rhet.org.uk/Teachers/Farm+Visits> (accessed 17th June 2013).