

Advice Note for Agricultural Students

Among the most common diseases that affect humans are zoonotic diseases – those diseases passed from animals and birds, to man. Contact with animals and their waste in any agricultural or farm setting leads to the potential for transmission of infectious disease. The absolute risk of becoming infected is low; but as the consequences for humans can be great; this risk should be minimised.

Zoonotic disease can be spread by direct contact with animals, such as bites and scratches, or through indirect contact with animal faeces and body fluids (including products of conception during lambing and calving), leading to contamination of the animals, their hides and/or their immediate environment (including pens, equipment, gates, housing etc.). See table below for diseases spread in agricultural settings.

More common	Less common
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campylobacteriosis • Cryptosporidiosis • Leptospirosis • Ringworm • Salmonellosis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brucellosis, • Orf virus • Psittacosis • Toxocariasis • Toxoplasmosis • Streptococcus suis infection • Tetanus • Q Fever • Tuberculosis • VTEC infection.

Infectious diseases can be spread by:

- Faecal-oral route: infected faecal matter from animals can be swallowed leading to gastrointestinal infection examples include VTEC infection, salmonellosis, and campylobacteriosis). This includes ingestion of contaminated food or water.
- Aerosolisation: and inhalation of the pathogens - psittacosis and toxoplasmosis can be contracted in this way
- Direct contact: such as animal bites and scratches.

There are a number of very simple measures that will minimise the likelihood of contracting a zoonotic disease in an agricultural setting. These include:

- Handwashing: the most important measure you can take to protect yourself. Wash your hands with soap and water, before:

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- eating
- drinking
- smoking
- preparing food
- touching children (especially babies)

NB: When washing your hands, it is not necessary to use warm water; cold water will do as long as the soap you are using forms lather.

Remember to wash your hands following:

- Any contact with animals or their surroundings
- Any contact with areas or farm equipment that is contaminated with animal dung or droppings
- Working in other contaminated areas
- Wash cuts and grazes immediately with soap and running water,
 - cover new and existing wounds with a waterproof dressing before beginning work
- Work clothes: should be:
 - removed before going into residential and eating areas
 - left at the workplace for cleaning
- Appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) e.g. gloves, aprons etc: should be:
 - worn as required to protect the user from contamination by blood and body fluids (e.g. when attending animals giving birth)
 - removed correctly and hygienically and either disposed of carefully, or cleaned and disinfected after use

If you develop symptoms of gastroenteritis, a rash, or a fever, you should alert your tutor immediately and seek medical advice. Always remember to mention to your doctor that you have had contact with animals in an agricultural environment.

For more information see:

1. http://www.zoonoses.ie/public/publications/Staying_Healthy_on_your_Farm.pdf
2. <http://www.hpsc.ie/A-Z/Zoonotic/>