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Hand washing Essential When Children Come Into Contact with Animals

In the wake of 23 children and three adults becoming seriously ill after visiting a petting zoo in Florida, the Oak Park Department of Public Health is reminding parents, teachers and child care workers of the importance of simple hand washing wherever children come in contact with animals.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for preventing transmission of animal-to-human diseases – officially called *zoonotic* diseases – say the single most important prevention step is hand washing.

The Oak Park Health Department helps reinforce this practice in child care centers and in animal care facilities through regular inspections and educational presentations. Currently, Oak Park has 35 day cares facilities and 12 animal care facilities that are inspected on an annual basis.

“Our first priority is to ensure that the health and safety of the children and staff are protected” says Margaret Provost Fyfe, who supervises the Health Department's community services programs. "Nurses not only inspect the child care facilities, but they also observe the behaviors of children and staff."

Day care centers are required to have easily accessible wash basins with adequate water temperature, soap and paper towels. Easily accessible hand washing facilities also are required in animal care facilities.

"People need to realize that they can get diseases from any animal, not just reptiles or birds," noted Mike Charley, Oak Park's environmental health supervisor. “Even dogs can carry diseases. The key is to wash your hands after handling any kind of creature.”

All animal care facility staff and volunteers are strongly recommended to wash their hands before and after handling each animal for their and the animals’ safety, Charley said.

For more information on preventing the transmission of zoonotic diseases or other community health issues, call 358.5480 or email health@oak-park.us.

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