

Foot And Mouth Disease Update

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The information in this fact sheet was compiled through a coordinated project of University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension; Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, Division of Animal Health; University of Wisconsin-Madison – College of Agricultural and Life Sciences and School of Veterinary Medicine; and U.S. Department of Agriculture, APHIS, Veterinary Services.

Biosecurity Precautions For Farmers

Q. How would farmers know if their animals got Foot and Mouth Disease?

A. An infected animal develops blisters, which burst and turn into sores, in its mouth, between the split of its hooves and on the teats. Early clinical signs include lameness, fever and loss of appetite. The severity of clinical signs differs among species. Swine show the most severe clinical signs; sheep show the least severe signs. Signs in cattle are intermediate. Any farmer or veterinarian who suspects a Foot and Mouth Disease infection should call either the USDA Wisconsin veterinarian at 608-270-4000 or the Wisconsin DATCP Division of Animal Health at 608-224-4872.

Q. How serious is the risk that the Foot and Mouth virus can be carried and transmitted by humans? Should farmers keep all visitors away from their farms and animals?

A. While the virus can live outside a host for a time, the chances that a human visitor to a farm will bring in the virus and infect the farm are remote, even if the visitor has been in a country infected with Foot and Mouth Disease. Most experts advise that people who have traveled in areas where the disease exists should stay away from cloven-hoofed animals for at least a week, should take care to clean and disinfect footwear and clothing and follow other precautions. People who have not traveled to infected areas pose very little risk.

Q. What on-farm precautions are reasonable?

A. It's smart for farmers with livestock to follow basic biosecurity procedures all the time, not just when there is an outbreak of a disease somewhere in the world. The precautions to take depend on the level of risk – how much contact a visitor to the farm will have with animals.

Agricultural workers who travel from farm to farm – milk haulers, veterinarians, inseminators, manure handlers, hoof trimmers, feed deliverers, consultants and extension agents – pose the highest risk. They should take special care to observe biosecurity procedures and avoid transmitting diseases. They should park away from any place where their vehicles might come in contact with disease organisms, animal waste or run-off. They should wear clean coveralls at each stop. They should clean and disinfect their boots when they arrive and leave; or they should use and leave behind disposable plastic boots. People working around animals that are sick or have a contagious disease should change into clean coveralls before tending other animals.

Visitors to the farm who will have no contact with animals pose little risk. They should clean footwear of dirt and debris before arriving at the farm and again before leaving, but other precautions are probably not necessary. There is a small risk that someone who has recently traveled in a region where Foot and Mouth Disease exists may carry the virus on his or her clothing, shoes or body. These travelers should not be near cloven-hoofed animals for at least 7 days after they return.

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Q. I've read some recommendations that are a lot stricter than these. Which should I believe?

A. Most experts think the precautions listed above are reasonable as long as there is no Foot and Mouth Disease in the United States. The virus that causes Foot and Mouth Disease does not survive well when exposed to sunlight, warm temperatures and dry air. It needs what the scientists call an organic matrix – a body, manure, animal products, soil – or it dies fairly quickly. One reason why the outbreak in Britain was difficult to contain was because the weather was mild and damp – ideal conditions for the virus to survive outside a host. If the disease does come here, stricter precautions will be recommended.

Q. What should farmers themselves do when they visit other farms, or attend events like farm breakfasts or the county fair?

A. If there are no animals present, there is very little risk of spreading disease. The most important precaution is to avoid wearing soiled boots or clothing. At farm breakfasts, the hosts would be wise to restrict visitors' access to the animals and animal facilities. The biggest risks are at events where animals come together and can infect each other – fairs, cattle shows, sales, and weigh-ins. However, as long as Foot and Mouth Disease has not been imported into the U.S., the animal health experts generally agree that the events should continue. If the disease does enter the U.S., however, it's likely officials will recommend canceling such events.

Q. How do I disinfect footwear, equipment and other items?

A. Clean off all soil, manure, straw or other materials, then disinfect with a solution of one ounce of household bleach in a gallon of water, or a solution of one part white vinegar and one part water. Wait at least 30 minutes to allow these disinfectants to work. Most commercial disinfectants are effective against the FMD virus. If there should be an outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease, disinfecting contaminated footwear, sites and equipment would require much higher concentrations of disinfectants and many other rigorous precautions.