

BASIC ADVICE TO REDUCE COMMON ANIMAL RELATED RISKS WHILE WORKING ON FARMS

Electric workers working on farms may believe they need to worry about health risks. The following discussion will try to put the dealing with animals and disease into a better perspective.

DOGS

Farm dogs can be protective and, practically speaking, are probably the most common animal-related hazard if your job requires working on a farm. Most farm dogs are not a hazard, but it may be hard to tell in some cases. You can decrease the risk of being bitten by observing some of the following precautions:

- * Avoid the temptation to pet dogs.

When a dog grants permission to be petted it is willing to be submissive to you. Some farm dogs may even appear friendly, but are too protective or alarmed to be submissive to anyone except farm family members.

- * Don't be a threat.

Walk slowly, avoid direct eye contact, keep your hands in your pockets, and do not walk directly towards dogs that are nervous or aggressive towards your presence. Dogs will often feel most comfortable in circling around and approaching strangers from the rear. When this happens, being still, or moving slowly about your business without turning to face the dog directly may help increase the dog's understanding that you are not a threat. If you are too uncomfortable with a threatening dog, it may be necessary to remain inside of your vehicle until an owner controls the animal.

- * Carry inexpensive treats.

Often having a bag of inexpensive dog treats in your vehicle to toss to a suspicious dog will decrease a dog's alarm at your presence on their farm.

- * Avoid hurting the sleeping dog (or cat).

In the summer time, dogs (and cats) will often seek rest in the shade under a vehicle. Checking for sleeping dogs under a vehicle (or on the tops of tires) that has been parked in the farm yard for any length of time during summer months may help to avoid the potential devastation of running over and killing a family pet.

- * Treat all bites or scratches seriously.

In addition to specific disease concerns like tetanus or cat scratch fever, wounds created by bites or scratches can be heavily contaminated and should be given attention. Contacting your physician may be wise, especially for bite wounds.

BULLS

A bull can kill you with surprising quickness. Whenever you need to enter an area where animals are loose, it is very important to ask if a bull is present. Avoid entering areas where bulls are loose, **EVEN IF AN OWNER SAYS THAT A BULL WILL NOT BOTHER YOU**. If you absolutely have to work in an area where a bull is loose, only work near a fence, or escape gate, and have someone watch over you while you work.

Workers on farms should also be aware that some cows are also very protective of their newborn calves. This situation is less common and is usually in a pasture or pen area where the calf is kept with the cow. A worker that enters such a pen may be attacked and severely injured by a cow.

KICKING

It is not uncommon for a cow (and especially a young cow or heifer) to kick out with her hind leg at a nearby stranger. Surprising an animal may result in being kicked, but the animals in a barn are usually well aware of your presence. They may be watching you as you approach, and kick out suddenly as you merely walk past. At all times, walking a good 4-6 feet away from the rear end of a standing cow is a wise precaution.

If you need to set up for testing or work around the rear legs of a cow, it may decrease your chance of getting kicked if the farmer or a member of the farm family is willing to be around while you need to work in that area. The voice, touch, or sight of a familiar person can reduce nervousness in an animal when strangers are present.

If you would happen to drop something in a gutter behind a cow, it is not a safe move to reach down to retrieve it. If a cow intends to kick you, it is unlikely that you will be able to react quickly enough to avoid it. Retrieving an object dropped in the gutter with a long handled tool, or asking the farmer to stand by the cow or to help you retrieve it may prevent an injury.

WASH HANDS

A farm is a very biological business. Regardless of how clean a dairy appears, bacteria are present almost everywhere. Most populations of organisms on a farm are common and normal inhabitants of human environments, but some are particularly capable of causing disease in humans. It is wise to avoid skin-to-skin contact with animals that have a very apparent skin disease, called ringworm. While on a farm it is best not to put your hands (or objects) into your mouth (or nose) without first washing your hands. When you have been on a farm, thoroughly washing your hands before eating is a very important disease prevention habit to practice.

WINTER DYSENTERY

A common disease that causes whole herd diarrhea on dairy farms during the abrupt weather changes of early spring or late fall is called winter dysentery. This disease is not known to cause illness in humans, but if you work on a farm that has winter dysentery and then travel to another farm, the second farmer may accuse you of infecting his herd when his animals become sick. There is evidence that this may not be true, but it is common that people doing service work from farm to farm are blamed for "bringing the dysentery in".

Regardless of the real source of the disease, I would caution you against working on any farm that currently has or recently has had winter dysentery. If possible, rescheduling the visit 2 or more weeks later may be the wisest choice. If you have to visit a farm with winter dysentery, take extra care to clean your equipment and boots upon leaving.

HARDWARE

Anyone doing work on dairy farms, especially around areas where cattle eat and drink, need to take considerable care not to drop tools or materials into feed managers or water sources. Any items dropped must be removed. Cattle can be indiscriminate eaters and are capable of consuming an amazing variety of foreign objects such as wire clippings, saw blades, nails, screws or staples. Such objects may then become lodged internally and cause cattle to go off feed or die.

BIOSECURITY

An increasing concern to the dairy industry and one that you may encounter more and more, especially on the newly expanding dairies, is that of biosecurity. There are several very devastating diseases that can be transferred from farm to farm by manure on uncleaned boots, clothes, and equipment. Increasingly, you may be expected to wear disposable plastic boots, and dairy-owned coveralls.

On farms where such extremes are not required, farmers are becoming more aware of the potential hazard of farm-to-farm transfer of disease by service persons. It is a good idea, and a long-standing industry tradition to wear washable rubber boots, and washable coveralls when visiting a farm on a service call. Whatever you use or wear on a farm, it is wise to come to a farm in clean coveralls or clothes and to scrub any manure from boots and equipment before leaving.

In addition, be aware that some farmers are particular about sanitation in the milkhouse, so it is always a good idea to treat the milkhouse with as much sanitary care as you would your own kitchen. Washing equipment and boots in the milkhouse, especially in the winter, may be perfectly acceptable, but it is best to ask before doing anything in the milkhouse that will dirty it.

REALITY OF DISEASES ON FARM

The reality of working on farms is that animal to human disease transfer can occur but is not a common occurrence. It is probably a good idea to be adequately vaccinated against tetanus, but this is true whether you work on a farm or not

There are some articles in the press claiming significant health risks from working on farms, and consuming milk and beef. However, the low incidence of such health problems in farmers and long standing farm service professions, such as the veterinarian, does not suggest a need for more than the above mentioned standard precautions. However, with dairy farms being very biological environments, it would make sense for individuals with compromised immune systems to avoid such work.

Having said all of this, my experience is that working on a dairy farm on a regular basis has not been abnormally hazardous to my health.