

Animals in Childcare Settings: Protect Against Illness

Diseases can spread from animals to humans, sometimes leading to illness and outbreaks. Young children are at the greatest risk for severe illness and injury. This is due to their inadequate hygienic practices, frequent hand-to-mouth activities and underdeveloped immune systems. For this reason, pets are not generally recommended in childcare settings.

Which pets are most likely to cause illness in a childcare program?

There are certain animals that are more likely to cause illness at your childcare centre because they shed disease-causing microorganisms. Other animals can put children and staff at risk of injury due to their naturally aggressive behavior.

Animals to avoid

- Stray animals
- Ill animals
- Animals under medical treatment
- Young animals (puppies/kittens <1 year)
- Animals fed a raw diet in last 90 days
- Birthing or pregnant animals
- Inherently dangerous animals (lion/tiger/bear/cougar)
- Predatory birds (hawk/eagle/owl)
- Venomous or toxin producing animals (spider/insect/reptile/amphibian)
- Aggressive animals (previous behaviour)
- Animals in heat
- Exotic animals (monkey/hedgehog/chinchilla)
- Wild animals (squirrel/raccoon/chipmunk/fox)

Animals not recommended for children under 5 years of age

- Reptiles and amphibians (turtles, frogs, snakes and lizards)
- Poultry (e.g. chicks, ducklings, goslings), eggs and hatching equipment (e.g. incubators)
- Ferrets
- Farm animals (e.g. calves, goats, sheep)

Common infections from animals

Salmonella: Spread by the fecal-oral route, these bacteria can cause symptoms such as stomach cramps, diarrhea, nausea, fever and sometimes vomiting. Many infections resolve on their own but some can lead to serious complications. Infection is more likely to occur from contact with reptiles, amphibians (e.g. African dwarf frogs) and poultry.

Campylobacter: Spread by the fecal-oral route, these bacteria can cause symptoms such as stomach cramps, diarrhea, nausea, fever, headaches and muscle pain. Many infections resolve on their own and very rarely result in serious complications. Infection is most likely to occur from contact with puppies, kittens and poultry/chicks.

E. coli: Spread by the fecal-oral route, these bacteria can cause severe abdominal cramping and diarrhea which can progress to bloody diarrhea. Complications such as hemolytic uremic syndrome can be fatal. Infection is most likely to occur from contact with farm animals including poultry.

Rabies: Spread to humans from the bite of an infected animal, rabies is a viral infection which is almost always fatal. Infection can occur from any mammal in Ontario including dogs, cats and ferrets.

Ways to minimize risk of infection for centres choosing to have a pet and/or visiting animal

Child and Pet Interaction Controls

- Determine whether children or childcare staff has an underlying medical condition that may put them at higher risk of infection, if they have any phobias or are allergic to certain animals.
- Teach children to never hurt, tease, surprise or corner an animal.
- Supervise children when they are with pets to ensure they are safe.
- Ensure children and staff wash their hands for 15 seconds using soap and water after handling the pet, their toys or bedding.
- Teach children not to put their hands in their mouth or touch their face until after they have washed their hands.
- Teach children not to touch or feed wild animals.
- Do not allow children to kiss the pets or hold them close to their face.
- Children and animals should be separated when food is served, during high-energy play and when the child or animal is sleeping.

Administrative Controls

- Ensure parent(s) or guardian(s) are consulted and provide written consent prior to the introduction of a pet.
- Develop a Pet Handling Policy. Ensure the policy is reviewed by Public Health.
- Do not allow ill, wild or inappropriate animals into the facility.
- Provide education to staff and children on how to safely interact with pets and appropriate infection prevention and control measures.
- If applicable, ensure all pet vaccinations are up-to-date. Keep a copy of the vaccination record on file.
- Keep all animal health documentation on-site.
- Ensure a veterinary care statement form is completed for every visiting and/or resident animal.
- Report all cat, dog, ferret and wild animal bites and scratches to Public Health.

Pet Care Controls

- Wash hands thoroughly for 15 seconds using soap and water after handling the pet, its food, toys, bedding, or feces.
- Do not allow children to clean cages and bedding, come in contact with feces, or handle raw animal food or treats.
- Confine all pets in an appropriate manner. Keep them out of eating and food preparation areas.
- Animals living in the childcare centre should be examined annually by a licensed veterinarian.
- Ensure outdoor sandboxes are covered when not in use. Staff should also check sandboxes and outdoor play areas prior to use to ensure they don't contain animal droppings.

Who is at High Risk for Infection?

- Children, especially those under 5 years of age
- Individuals 65 years of age and older
- Pregnant women
- Cognitively impaired individuals
- Persons with a weakened immune system.

