

# Handwashing on Dairy Farms Is Not Just During a Pandemic

Whether we are facing a pandemic from an emerging virus or carrying out the day-to-day operations on a farm, handwashing is a simple, but invaluable protective measure for everyone.



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Sick days and vacation time are not easy to come by for many farmers, so staying healthy is a necessity. Developing and implementing hygienic practices can be beneficial for all involved in protecting humans from diseases carried by animals and the reverse as farmers protect their animals from diseases that are spread by humans. Diseases that are acquired from contact with animals are referred to as zoonotic diseases.

Exposure to certain zoonotic diseases can occur through work on dairy farms. The authors of one recent study examined factors related to the prevention of exposure to zoonotic disease through a socio-ecological context for farm workers on dairies in Colorado (Palomares Velosa et al. 2020). They also confirmed occupational exposure

to certain pathogens. In this study, knowledge and risk perception were identified as protective factors. This finding supports the inclusion of education on zoonotic disease prevention as part of employee training for dairies. Another interesting finding from their survey was that more respondents (64%) expressed concern of transmitting a disease to their family than were concerned of contracting a zoonotic disease themselves (49%).

Knowledge about the spread of zoonotic disease is an area where more education is warranted. A survey of various types of farmers in Ireland indicated that the majority of those responding were not aware that a zoonotic disease is picked up from an animal and even fewer respondents realized that healthy animals could be a source of zoonotic infections (Mahon et al. 2017). Another group of researchers reviewed the handwashing practices of workers from multiple swine and poultry farms (Odo et al. 2015). There was significant variation between the farms in the number of respondents that indicated they always washed their hands after contact with animals with an average of only 42% responding with always.

While there is a demonstrated need, not all farm management is comfortable with providing education for employees, so other avenues for conveying information are being studied. For example, mobile technologies or m-learning has been employed to increase safety practices among dairy workers (Rodriguez et al. 2018). Hygiene, cleanliness, and the use of personal protective equipment were included with this mobile learning project. For those seeking more information, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) has a webpage](#) that includes videos, activities, and training materials that is dedicated to handwashing.

The agricultural industry is constantly on alert for emerging pathogens, new routes of transmission, and working to protect our food supply by putting protective measures in place. Hygiene practices are a basic, universal element that should be utilized by all.

Here are some suggestions for your farm:

- Develop and train everyone involved with the farm on Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for hygiene including handwashing procedures explaining how and when, glove usage, designated work clothes, cleaning boots, eating and drinking in the barn, wound care, and reporting illness to management.
- Provide designated handwashing facilities that include warm water, soap, paper towels or hand dryers.
- Periodically review hygiene practices and recommendations with farm employees and family members. Using handwashing activities may make this more impactful.
- Post reminders and instructions near sinks.
- Make hand sanitizer available when handwashing facilities are not an option. Be aware that hand sanitizers are not a substitute for handwashing.
- Review glove usage SOPs. Remember that gloves can be a source of contamination if they are not used properly. Proper handwashing is still needed even when gloves are used.
- Be vigilant in monitoring herd health. Reinforce with your team the importance of good hygiene practices when dealing with sick animals.

## References

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