

Five Simple Steps to Improve Biosecurity Around Livestock

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Dairy cattle at the opening of the Cornell Teaching Dairy Barn.

Lindsay France / Cornell University

Now that we're on the verge of summer, some farms may start to see an increase in foot traffic. Dairy farms receive regular visits from feed dealers, nutritionists, veterinarians, and other agricultural service providers, not to mention the milk truck. Livestock producers may open their doors to the public for farm tours and other events. Direct market farms often see an increase in visitor traffic at farm stands and agritourism attractions during the summer season.

When traveling from one farm to another, it is important for livestock producers and farm visitors alike to think about the health and safety of farm animals. Bacteria and viruses that cause infectious diseases in livestock can easily hitch a ride on your boots, equipment, car tires, or even on your hands. Some of these pathogens may make people sick too. Taking basic biosecurity precautions is important, not only for livestock but also for people interacting with farm animals.

The primary goal of any biosecurity measure is to reduce the risk of spreading disease. When I hear the word "biosecurity," it makes me think of high-tech scientific procedures, sanitized laboratories, and HAZMAT suits. But this is not what biosecurity has to look like on our farms. In fact, there are a number of simple yet highly effective steps that farmers and their visitors can take to dramatically reduce the spread of disease from one farm to another.

Tips for the Visitor

1. Clean up before visiting the farm.

If you are touring another dairy, come in clean clothes and boots. Visitors should wear clean, laundered clothing onto a farm. This step is especially important if you have your own livestock! Leave your dirty muck boots and chore clothes at home. Keep a separate pair of boots exclusively for visiting other farms, and don't wear them on your home farm. Consider wearing protective clothing, which may include disposable gloves, booties, or coveralls, depending on

what parts of the farm you will visit. This is especially important if you will be around sick animals or in areas with lots of manure.

2. Avoid unnecessary exposure to germs.

Visitors can avoid unnecessary exposure to pathogens by staying in lower-risk areas on the farm. Upon arrival, park your car close to the road or in a designated visitor parking area, rather than driving all over the farm. When touring a farm, avoid areas with lots of manure if you can. If you're just there to talk with the farmer, do you really need to walk through the barn? If you need to walk through the barn, can you stay in a cleaner area, rather than walking through the pens? Don't go near sick animals unless you absolutely must!

3. Take extra precautions around vulnerable animals.

Be aware of which animals are most vulnerable to disease, and take care to visit animals with lowered immunity first. Vulnerable groups may include newborns, young stock, new moms, and pregnant animals. If you must spend time around sick animals, make sure to visit them last before leaving the farm. This will reduce the risk of spreading pathogens from sick animals to healthy animals on the same farm.

On a dairy, for example, always visit the feed area first, so you don't transport any pathogens from walking through manure into the feed. Next, visit the newborns, if necessary, followed by the older calves. Then visit dry cows and maternity pens before visiting the milking herd. Always visit sick animals last.

Do not go near newborn calves if you have already been around the milking herd or any sick animals. If you must enter the newborn facility after visiting other areas on the farm, make sure to change your clothes, and wash and disinfect your boots and hands. Take every precaution to avoid exposing calves to manure from older livestock.

4. Wash your hands. A lot.

What is the most important thing you can do to prevent the spread of contagious disease? This was a quiz question that I got wrong while training to become an Emergency First Responder. I said "wear gloves while treating patients," but the correct answer, to paraphrase, was "wash your hands, a lot."

This rule also applies to a farm setting. Your hands get exposed to all sorts of bacteria and viruses on the farm. Fortunately, your skin is great at keeping those pathogens out of your body. But if you take those dirty hands and rub your eyes, blow your nose, get a cut, or eat something, then the pathogens have a way in. Properly washing your hands is the best thing you can do to avoid contracting a contagious disease, and it will also reduce the risk of spreading disease to other people and animals.

Wash your hands regularly while working with livestock, and always wash your hands after handling livestock and before eating. Make hand washing stations available in convenient locations around the farm to encourage this practice.

5. Leave germs behind when you leave the farm.



*Biosecurity measures can include changing boots between farms or considering protective boot covers.
Allison Usavage / Cornell University*

Leave manure and the germs it contains, on the farm that it came from. Throw away any disposable protective clothing before leaving the farm. If you have walked through manure, thoroughly wash and disinfect your boots before you leave. This is also a good time to wash and disinfect your hands.

You cannot disinfect manure, so in order to leave germs behind you need to start with a clean surface. Scrubbing your boots with soap and water is highly effective at removing manure, dirt and other debris. In fact, thoroughly washing dirty boots with soap and water can eliminate 95% to 99% of germs. You can use a high-pressure hose, a stationary boot wash, or even a bucket of soapy water and a brush. Be sure not to contaminate your soapy water! Pour water over your boots and your brush, rather than dipping dirty boots and brushes into the bucket.

After cleaning your boots, use a disinfectant to remove any remaining pathogens. Virkon is a multi-purpose disinfectant with a broad spectrum of activity against viruses and bacteria that infect farm animals. If Virkon is not available, bleach or Lysol may be used as a disinfectant. Avoid contaminating your disinfectant solution by pouring or spraying it onto your boots. Do not dip dirty boots or equipment into the disinfectant.

If you can't wash up on the farm, consider changing your boots and any other clothing that came into contact with animals or manure before you leave. Put dirty footwear and clothing into a container to be washed and disinfected when you get home.

This blog post originally appeared on the South Central NY Dairy & Field Crops Team blog.