

Zoo to You column for Garden City Telegram

By Kristi Newland, Zoo Director

15 November 2017

Topic: Cold and Flu season

It's cold and flu season. I know because it's running through the staff at the zoo just as it is elsewhere in town. Of course, we take precautions: wash your hands, cover when you sneeze or cough, but sometimes it still sneaks up on you. There are some other cold/flu precautions we take at the zoo that most people do not need to worry about. If a staff member has a cold or feels the flu might be coming on and they are going to be working around the zoo primates, black-footed ferret or giant anteater, they wear a mask or switch routines with someone who isn't ailing so they don't pass it on to these animals. Other animals at the zoo aren't susceptible to these illnesses, so when working with them the extra precautions are not necessary. Can you imagine an anteater with a stuffy nose?

There are a number of diseases that can pass between humans and animals and vice versa. These are called zoonotic diseases. Some zoonotic diseases can be very mild; others such as rabies or malaria can be very serious. They can be passed through direct contact with the afflicted animal (ringworm, salmonella), or through a bite from the infected animal (rabies) or from a carrier (malaria). Others can be transferred through some form of indirect contact: contact with fecal matter of the affected animal (toxoplasmosis), consuming contaminated foodstuffs (trichinosis) or drinking water, or inhaling the dust contaminated with the bacteria from fecal matter or fluids of an infected animal.

This doesn't mean you have to get rid of your pets, stop eating meat, or never leave your house. There are some simple precautions, many of which you're probably already doing, which can help you avoid some of these afflictions. Monitor the health of your animals and address any issues in a timely manner with your veterinarian. Follow recommendations for vaccinations for your pets and farm animals. Avoid eating undercooked meat and wash fruits and vegetables before eating them.

The biggest step to avoid zoonotic diseases is washing your hands. Do this after you have contact with animals, before you eat, after digging in the dirt with your hands, etc. Additionally, it's a good practice to avoid direct contact with animal feces when cleaning up after them, so be sure to use tools or wear gloves. It's best to dry clean animal areas first to remove the majority of the waste material. Feces can become aerosolized when hosed and that makes it much more likely that you'll breathe in bacteria from the fecal matter.

And don't forget, if you're going to be traveling outside of the country, check with your family physician and visit the website for the Center for Disease Control (CDC) regarding recommended vaccinations. It's always a good idea to do some research on precautions you'll need to take while you're "in-country" prior to actually visiting another country. For example, it may not be mosquito season here right now, but in other parts of the world it is, and they can be a carrier for some zoonotic diseases.

Taking a few simple precautions will help you and the animals you care for stay healthy during the upcoming holidays and throughout the year. Have a happy holiday season.