

COVID-19 & YOUR FARM



The human pandemic in early 2020 caused by coronavirus (COVID-19) has rocked every industry, including agriculture. While it may be tempting to think we are safe in our “farm bubble,” international travel has rapidly spread the virus into every state and multiple counties. It would be short-sighted to think we are immune just because we spend the bulk of our time on the farm. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have established helpful guidelines to protect the public and minimize further spread. These measures include:

Hand washing

- Frequent handwashing with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. This is especially important after you have been in a public place or after blowing your nose, sneezing or coughing. If soap and water aren't available, cover the entire surface of your hands with hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% isopropyl alcohol. Rub your hands until they feel dry. Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands.

WHAT CAN YOUR FARM DO: Make sure soap, towels, and hand sanitizer are readily available

Protect yourself and your employees

- Avoid contact with people who are sick. For your farm, this might mean screening employees on arrival. Many industries are taking temporal or oral temperatures of employees at the beginning of their shift. Anyone with a fever is sent home. While this may make for a temporary labor shortage on your farm, it is better than having your entire work force infected and unable to work at once. Employees should be fever-free for 24 hours after discontinuing fever-reducing medication.
- If you feel sick yourself, stay home and seek medical attention. Telemedicine is recommended to screen for COVID-19 before going to a physical medical facility. Some counties have mobile testing stations that allow you to be screened in your vehicle as well. Wear a mask and avoid contact with people while you are ill.
- Maintain a 6 foot distance between yourself and others. Handshaking and hugging are discouraged. This “social distancing” helps prevent virus spread via droplets.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your arm when you cough and sneeze. Throw the used tissue away and then wash your hands.

Practice daily hygiene

- Daily clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched frequently. This includes door knobs, handles, light switches, counters, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, sinks, microwaves and buttons. Wearing gloves during work hours and while out in the public is another protective measure.

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- Minimize employee meetings so no more than 5 people are in the same room at once. Switching to a telephone conference or an online meeting is a viable option. If a team meeting must be held, have it in a large space so people can be 6 feet apart.
- Older people and those whose immune systems are compromised due to other medical conditions are at an increased risk of infection. According to the 2017 ag census, the average age of farm operators is 58 years. 26% of operators are over 65 years. Protect these citizens by staying at home if you are ill or have been around anyone who is COVID positive, and stand at least 6 feet away if you need to meet with an older person.

While these recommendations are particularly important for minimizing COVID spread, they also apply to other everyday illnesses such as influenza and the common cold. Once the pandemic has slowed, hand washing is still the best line of defense against contagious disease.

With schools and many daycares closed, providing childcare for employees so they can continue to work is another consideration. If a safe playing area is available on your farm, a responsible adult could oversee children so employees can focus on their regular tasks.

At this point in time, it is unclear if the human COVID virus can infect animals. Cattle have a different strain of coronavirus that causes diarrhea and respiratory signs. Cattle coronavirus vaccines should NOT be used in humans since their safety in people is unknown. As of March 2020, two dogs have been transiently COVID positive and both dogs had owners who were COVID infected. It is unlikely that pets get sick or can transmit COVID to people, but if you become ill you should avoid touching, feeding, playing or caring for animals.

As the pandemic continues to evolve, consult the CDC's website for up to date recommendations and strategies to protect yourself and your employees.

CONTRIBUTER



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Dr. Lauer is involved in the American Veterinary Medical Association, Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Association, American Association of Small Ruminant Practitioners and the American Association of Bovine Practitioners.

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