Care and Use of Armadillos, Ant-Eaters & Sloths

The Occupational Health and Safety Program is designed to inform individuals who work with animals about potential zoonoses (diseases of animals transmissible to humans), personal hygiene, and other potential hazards associated with animal exposure. This information sheet is directed toward those who work with armadillos, ant-eaters, and sloths.

Potential Zoonotic Diseases

Armadillos, ant-eaters, and sloths are wild animals and should be handled accordingly. The primary danger from these slow moving animals is their sharp, razor-like claws. The overall incidence of transmission of disease-producing agents from this animal family to humans is low. The primary zoonotic disease attributed to these animals is leprosy.

LEPROSY: Mycobacterium leprae is a polymorphic acid-alcohol-fast bacillus. M. leprae is hard to distinguish from other unculturable mycobacterium naturally infecting animals. The nine-banded armadillo (Dasypus novemcinctus) serves as a model for lepromatous leprosy and provides a large number of bacilli for research. Ant eaters and sloths do not harbor leprosy. In humans, the incubation period is usually 3 to 5 years, but it can vary from 6 months to 10 years or more. Clinical forms of leprosy cover a wide spectrum, ranging from mild, self-healing lesions to a progressive and destructive chronic disease. Basically, the skin lesions present in a variety of forms. Leprosy is characterized by numerous symmetrical skin lesions consisting of macula and diffuse infiltrations, plaques, and nodules of varying sizes (lepromas). The skin lesions can be light colored or red. Serious consequences include nerve destruction which results in anesthesia (loss of sensation). This can lead to unrecognized trauma, i.e., ulcerations and fractures. Man is the principal reservoir of M. leprae. The method of transmission is still not well known. The origin of infection in animals is unknown. It is believed that armadillos contracted the infection from a human source. It should be pointed out that leprosy bacilli may remain viable for a week in dried nasal secretions and that armadillos are in close contact with the soil. The high disease prevalence in some localities would indicate armadillos can transmit the infection to one another, either by inhalation or direct contact. Medical control is based on early detection and chemotherapy.

How to Protect Yourself

- **Wash your hands.** The single most effective preventative measure that can be taken is thorough, regular hand washing. Wash hands and arms after handling armadillos, ant-eaters, and sloths. Never smoke, drink or eat after handling an animal without washing your hands.

- **Wear gloves.** You should protect your hands by wearing sturdy, impervious gloves.
Seek Medical Attention Promptly. If you are injured on the job, promptly report the accident to your supervisor, even if it seems relatively minor. Minor cuts and abrasions should be immediately cleansed with antibacterial soap and then protected from exposure. For more serious injuries, or if there are any questions, employees should report to Occupational Health Services.

Tell your physician you work with this animal family. Whenever you are ill, even if you’re not certain that the illness is work-related, always mention to your physician that you work with armadillos, anteaters or sloths. Many zoonotic diseases have flu-like symptoms and would not normally be suspected. Your physician needs this information to make an accurate diagnosis. Questions regarding personal human health should be answered by your physician.

Contact

Occupational Health Services
employeehealth@ucdavis.edu 530-752-6051
More information
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