Care and Use of Elephants

The Occupational Health 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 involved in the care and use of elephants.

Potential Injury & Zoonotic Diseases

Elephants are large creatures and as a whole must be handled carefully and professionally. While some elephants may be incredibly docile around humans, others may not be so comfortable with and tolerant of human interaction. Taking into consideration the variations of the individuals, each elephant has its own temperament, and mental and physical thresholds. Only experienced and authorized elephant handlers or keepers should be permitted in the areas used by elephants.

Zoonotic disease can be a hazard when working with elephants, as well as any other animal. The following lists several of the diseases that are associated with the care and handling of elephants:

**Tuberculosis:** This disease may be transmitted to people through contact with birds, livestock, and non-human primates. Tuberculosis is usually transmitted by the aerosolization of infective bacilli which can be found mainly in the sputum as well as other body fluids. When dealing with animals, contact with body fluids during necropsy may be a major mode of transmission of tuberculosis to humans. Pulmonary tuberculosis is the most common type, but other organs may also be involved.

**Anthrax:** This is an acute bacterial infection of humans and animals which may be rapidly fatal. The disease occurs worldwide and is an occupational hazard of persons, such as wool-sorters, farm workers and veterinarians, in contact with infected animals or their by-products. All domestic, zoo and wild animals are potentially at risk of infection. Anthrax bacilli are released from infected carcasses and form resistant spores on exposure to air. These spores contaminate soil for many years. Humans are usually infected by inoculation from direct contact with infected animals, carcasses or animal products, and contaminated soil. Inhalation or ingestion of spores may occur. Animals are infected from contaminated feed, forage, water or carcasses. Cutaneous anthrax causes localized ulceration (sores) and scabs with fever and headache, which may be followed within a few days by septicemia and meningitis. Inhalation anthrax causes fulminating pneumonia. Intestinal anthrax is associated with acute gastroenteritis (nausea, diarrhea, and bloody diarrhea).
**Salmonella:** This bacterium inhabits the intestinal tract of many animals and humans. Salmonella occurs worldwide and is easily transmitted through ingestion. Common symptoms of the illness are acute gastroenteritis with sudden onset of abdominal pain, diarrhea, nausea, and fever. Antibiotic treatment is standard treatment for the illness. Prevention is through good personal hygiene and the use of protective clothing.

**Allergic Reactions:** There are no specific allergy concerns when dealing with elephants, but environmental factors need to be taken into consideration. Enclosure areas may contain dust, feed stock, and hay. Sensitive individuals should wear appropriate personal protective equipment.

**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 elephants. Never smoke, drink or eat in the animal areas or before washing your hands.

- **Wear protective clothing.** When working with elephants, wear appropriate coveralls and foot wear, and remove them after completing your work.

- **Wear respiratory protection.** Dust masks should be worn while handling feed stock or if you already have allergies and you are outside in dusty areas. Respiratory protections should be worn during necropsy.

- **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 to dirt or livestock. For more serious injuries or if there are any questions, employees should report to UCD Occupational Health Services.

- **Tell your physician you work with elephants.** 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 elephants. 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**

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