

Dog Owners, Wash Your Hands

Vets stress importance of clean hands during National Handwashing Awareness Week.

Posted: December 13, 2008, 5 a.m. EST

Pet owners, wash your hands. That's the message that the American Veterinary Medical Association wants to drive home during National Handwashing Awareness Week, which kicked off Sunday, Dec. 7.

The AVMA has partnered with other U.S. public health groups in urging everyone to take their health into their own hands by practicing proper handwashing. Created in 1999 by physician Dr. Will Sawyer due to a flu vaccine shortage in Cincinnati, National Handwashing Awareness Week is now observed across the country during the first full week of December.

Careful handwashing greatly helps reduce the spread of disease between animals and people, known as zoonotic disease, said Dr. James Cook, AVMA president. "We are exposed to germs or expose others to germs as we go through our day, interacting with animals and other people," Cook said.

Often the best way to avoid getting sick or spreading diseases to other people, he said, is by keeping hands free of germs through thorough handwashing. Dogs and cats, especially those who go outside, can carry germs from the environment into the home on their fur, paws, or in their mouths.

Some animals, like turtles, iguanas, snakes, and lizards, often carry Salmonella bacteria. Petting zoos, farms, county fairs, and other sites that allow human contact with farm animals pose a risk for the spread of E. Coli, among other diseases. Simple handwashing can reduce that risk, according to the AVMA.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 5,000 people die from food-borne illnesses each year. Poor handwashing is to blame for many of these deaths.

In addition, there are 76 million food-borne illnesses resulting in more than 300,000 hospital admissions each year. Cook said that it's critical to wash your hands before and after food preparation and eating, as well as after handling animals.

For National Handwashing Week and all year long, it's important to use soap and running water and scrub all surfaces of your hands for 20 seconds before drying with a paper towel. An alcohol-based hand sanitizer can be used if soap and water aren't available.

Since 2002, the CDC has recommended that healthcare workers use these sanitizers after treating patients, and Cook has fitted his animal hospital with sanitizer dispensers outside of each exam room. "Simple steps such as these go a long way in preventing the spread of disease among my staff and clients," Cook said.