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Healthy Animals, Healthy YOUTH

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A University of Maryland Extension (UME) education project for youth in agriculture is helping students understand zoonosis — the transference of diseases between animals and humans.

Published On: Aug 5, 2019**Author:** Laura Wormuth

4-H and FFA students who show animals at fairs and expos will benefit from learning about zoonosis and how to prevent disease transmission.

Image Credit: Photo by Edwin Remsberg

Led by Chris Anderson, senior agent and 4-H youth development specialist at UME, the "Healthy Animals, Healthy YOUTH" Zoonoses Education Project for Youth in Agriculture focuses on introducing people to safe animal handling, proper hygiene, and how to limit the transfer of pathogens between humans and animals.

"While the project was developed for students in 4-H and FFA, we emphasized the YOU in youth in hopes that adults — everyone — would be able to see themselves in it," said Anderson. The UME Zoonoses Education team is partnering with the Maryland Department of Health, the Maryland Department of Agriculture, and West Virginia University to complete the various facets.

Those facets, funded by a \$50,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists, will include the creation of new materials and activities, and builds upon existing resources, to incorporate zoonosis education into 4-H and FFA experiences.

"We're trying to show how important zoonosis is, how it fits into the big picture of human, animal and environmental health," said Anderson, who grew up in 4-H, and spent 20 years with the University of Illinois Extension working with 4-H before coming to Maryland.

The full scope of the zoonosis education project is comprised of several components including an update to the state [4-H Animal Husbandry and Quality Assurance Training Program](#) (AH&QA), a requirement for youth who will care for and show farm animals at fairs and expositions throughout the year, as well as an

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activity kit comprised of lesson plans and hands-on learning exercises and instruction for various age groups to learn about zoonosis.

"We're taking some of the main talking points from the zoonosis education content and updating our online animal husbandry and quality assurance training program," Anderson said. "We're talking to them about how they identify specific zoonosis diseases that are common to beef, swine, poultry, and other livestock we raise in Maryland."

The new AH&QA updates are already available to students in agricultural programs such as 4-H and FFA, and the lessons build on each component as the students age up, building out their knowledge not only of disease transmission and prevention, but also increasing their species-specific knowledge.

In addition to programming updates, the project not only helps students to understand the various ways pathogens can be transported through direct and indirect contact, but also gives them a toolkit for prevention of transmission.

"A big element to break down in disease transmission is handwashing," said Anderson. "We spend a lot of time emphasizing the proper procedure and more importantly, helping them understand that it is important."

Handwashing is just one part of a biosecurity protocol on a farm or at a fair, but it is an important one, said Anderson, who is also working with his team to develop safety education materials, as well as videos, that will demonstrate topics ranging from biosecurity protocols and proper handling and care of animals, to the proper use of personal protective equipment, as a part of this project.

The zoonoses education activity kits have been distributed to educators in each county throughout Maryland and W. Virginia. "We see this as a beginning and we will continue taking the opportunity to get in front of youth that this would influence," said Anderson. "It's awareness and educating our youth — that's what this is all about."

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