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2. Health and social care (<https://www.gov.uk/health-and-social-care>)
3. Public health (<https://www.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/public-health>)

Guidance

# Pregnancy: advice on contact with animals that are giving birth

Advice to give pregnant women on infections that can be transmitted via contact with animals that are or have recently given birth.

From: Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-environment-food-rural-affairs>), Department of Health and Social Care (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-of-health-and-social-care>), Health and Safety Executive (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/health-and-safety-executive>), and Public Health England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>)

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## Contents

- Risks in pregnancy
- Prevention of infection
- Chlamydiosis
- Listeriosis
- Q fever
- Toxoplasmosis
- Information for farmers and employers
- Further information

[Print this page](#)

## Risks in pregnancy

In order to protect their own health and that of their unborn child, women who are, or who may be, pregnant should be advised to avoid close contact with livestock animals.

This is because infectious organisms may be present in birth fluids of animals, particularly sheep, cattle and goats. Such organisms may result in infections such as chlamydiosis, listeriosis, Q fever and toxoplasmosis.

Different animal species are involved which give birth at different times of the year, meaning that the risks are not only confined to the spring when the majority of lambs are born.

Although these infections are uncommon, and the number of human pregnancies affected by contact with sheep is extremely small, it is important that pregnant women are made aware of the potential risks in order to safeguard their health and that of their unborn baby.

## Prevention of infection

To avoid the possible risk of infection, pregnant women should:

- not help ewes to lamb, or provide assistance to a cow that is calving or a nanny goat that is kidding
- avoid contact with aborted or new-born lambs, calves or kids or with the afterbirth, birthing fluids or materials such as bedding contaminated by such birth products
- avoid handling or washing clothing, boots or any materials that may have come into contact with animals that have recently given birth, their young or afterbirths, potentially contaminated clothing will be safe to handle after being washed on a hot cycle
- ensure that contacts or partners who have attended animals giving birth take appropriate health and hygiene precautions. This includes wearing personal protective equipment and clothing and adequate washing to remove any potential contamination

Pregnant women should be advised to seek medical advice if they experience fever or influenza-like symptoms, or if they are concerned that they could have acquired infection from a farm environment.

Farmers and livestock keepers have a responsibility to minimise the risks to pregnant women, including members of their family, the public and professional staff visiting farms.

## Chlamydiosis

This is caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia abortus*. In pregnancy this can be a severe, sometimes life-threatening, disease in the mother, and result in stillbirth or miscarriage.

See more information on disease in humans (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/chlamydia-abortus>).

Chlamydiosis is the commonest cause of infectious abortion in sheep in the UK (and is known as enzootic abortion of ewes, EAE), but is a rare cause of abortion in cattle.

A vaccine is available for use in sheep. It is a live vaccine and should not be handled by pregnant women or women of childbearing age.

For disease in animals, see the annual UK Zoonoses Report (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/zoonoses-reports>).

## Listeriosis

Listeriosis is a disease caused by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. *Listeria* is typically spread by contaminated foods, but some listeriosis cases occur through contact with animals.

Infection can cause serious disease in pregnant women. In the unborn fetus this may result in miscarriage or premature birth, while in the newborn, infection can lead to septicaemia and meningitis with a high mortality.

See human disease (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/listeria-guidance-data-and-analysis>).

About 150-250 diagnoses are made each year in the UK in sheep and goats. For disease in animals, see the annual UK Zoonoses Report (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/zoonoses-reports>).

## Q fever

Q fever is caused by the bacterium *Coxiella burnetii* which is widespread globally among livestock and domestic ruminants. Sheep, cattle and goats are the most frequent source of human infection, although pets such as dogs and cats may also be a source.

Q fever acquired during pregnancy is usually asymptomatic in the mother, although chronic infections may subsequently become apparent. Occasionally, acute Q fever in pregnancy, regardless of whether this is symptomatic or not, may result in an adverse effect on the fetus and may result in a premature birth, a low birth weight, or miscarriage.

See more information on disease in humans (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/q-fever>) and on prevention (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/q-fever#prevention>).

For disease in animals, see the annual UK Zoonoses Report (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/zoonoses-reports>).

## Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasmosis is caused by the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. Infection in people and animals is usually asymptomatic or mild and self-limiting. Toxoplasmosis acquired for the first time in pregnancy may infect the foetus and this could lead to congenital malformation, however, the majority of babies (90-95%) have no symptoms. Some affected babies may develop eye disease in later life.

See more information on toxoplasmosis in humans (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/toxoplasmosis>).

After chlamydiosis, toxoplasmosis is generally the second most commonly diagnosed cause of abortion in sheep in the UK.

There is a vaccine for use in sheep. It is a live vaccine and should not be handled by pregnant women or women of childbearing age, as accidental self administration or ingestion may interfere with normal foetal development.

For disease in animals, see the annual UK Zoonoses Report (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/zoonoses-reports>).

## Information for farmers and employers

Further information on zoonoses and appropriate control measures can be found on the Health and Safety Executive website (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/topics/zoonoses.htm>).

Farmers should consult their private veterinary surgeon about suitable vaccination programmes and any other disease control measures in sheep, cattle and goats.

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations 2002 require employers and the self-employed to assess risks to health from harmful substances, including micro-organisms, and to take steps to prevent or control those risks.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require employers and the self employed to further assess any risks which affect pregnant women.

## Further information

NHS Choices has more information about infections in pregnancy

(<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pregnancy-infections/#animals>) and pregnancy and lambing (<http://www.nhs.uk/chq/pages/934.aspx>).

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## Related content

- Toxoplasmosis: diagnosis, epidemiology and prevention (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/toxoplasmosis>)
- Toxoplasma reference laboratory (TRL) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/toxoplasma-reference-laboratory-trl>)
- Chlamydia abortus: epidemiology, transmission and prevention (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/chlamydia-abortus>)
- Q fever: good practice for farmers (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/q-fever-good-practice-for-farmers>)
- Intrathecal antibody test request form (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/intrathecal-antibody-test-request-form>)

## Collection

- Zoonotic diseases (zoonoses): guidance, data and analysis (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/zoonotic-diseases-zoonoses-guidance-data-and-analysis>)

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