



What dairy farmers must know about COVID-19

These steps can help prevent the spread of COVID-19 on dairy farms.

by Dr. David Douphrate and Dr. Anabel Rodriguez

C COVID-19 is now a pandemic — a global outbreak of the disease. The situation in the U.S. is quickly changing day-by-day and affecting the daily lives of many, including dairy farmers.

We strongly encourage you to take this unprecedented situation very seriously and rely on facts and guidance from official organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other state and federal bodies. You should have a plan and the related actions from that plan are required now to ensure the health and safety of your workers as well as to mitigate disruptions in the dairy supply chain. Your role and responsibility are of national interest and our nation's food security is paramount.

Fifteen on-farm strategies

Dairy farms are unique work environments. With that in mind, here are some considerations:

1. Practice basic hygiene at work. Workers should be washing hands frequently using soap and water or hand sanitizer. Managers should communicate the importance of good hygiene practices via signage throughout the farm.
2. Make soap and hand sanitizer available all around the farm. This should include locations where there are essential off-farm visitors such as the front office and scale office.
3. As much as possible, limit close interactions between coworkers. The milking parlor, maternity, and hospital operations are areas that often necessitate close interactions. Workers who show signs or report symptoms of COVID-19 should not be allowed to work or be on the farm. One strategy is to check worker body temperatures before work shifts using inexpensive, no-contact infrared scanners that can be purchased online, or at a local pharmacy or other retailer.
4. Encourage workers to stay 6 to 10 feet apart and communicate via radios or cellphones. Work meetings should be limited when possible. Meetings should be held in a well-ventilated area or

in an outside space. When group meetings do take place, workers should be adequately spaced apart a minimum of 6 feet to mitigate possible virus transmission.

5. Avoid handshaking between workers. Employ other greeting methods like elbow and foot taps or distance waves. Discourage food and beverage sharing between workers.

6. Disinfect all hard surfaces regularly. Recent studies have reported that active COVID-19 can remain airborne from 30 minutes up to three hours; on cardboard materials up to 24 hours; on stainless steel up to two days; and on plastic up to three days.

A critical analysis of all work and product surfaces should be undertaken to identify which materials should undergo some form of a sanitization or cleansing. This includes two-way radios, cellphones, machinery cabs, office areas and desks, restrooms, break room surfaces, lockers, door handles, switches, time clocks, and any other surface that might provide an opportunity for virus transmission.

Disinfect items at least twice a day using Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) registered antimicrobial products for use against COVID-19; a list can be found at on.hoards.com/disinfectants. Assign workers or teams on each shift the responsibility to disinfect regularly used areas and surfaces. Communicate to these workers the importance of this task, and the success of the farm depends on their efforts and diligence.

7. Wear appropriate Personal Protective Equipment or PPE. This includes gloves, goggles, aprons, and masks when necessary. Replace as needed.

8. Clean or launder all worker uniforms daily.

9. Cross-train workers to allow them to perform different job tasks on the farm in the event of limited staffing.

10. Don't allow nonessential off-farm visitors on the farm. When off-farm vendors come on the dairy site, their visit should be recorded with visitor name, purpose, and time. Only essential personnel should be allowed in the tank room. Food delivery vendors should be organized on

COVID-19 CAN SURVIVE ON STAINLESS STEEL for up to two days and on plastic for up to three days. That makes constant cleaning and sanitizing paramount.

a pre-order basis, with currency exchange and delivery of orders taking place away from farm operations. Social visits by family members of workers should not be allowed on the farm.

11. Maintain a single entry/exit to the farm to control non-essential workers or visitors from gaining access to the farm.

12. Inquire if there are family or friends of workers that would be interested in filling roles in case of a shortage due to COVID-19. Students on extended break or completing online courses the balance of the school year may be an option.

13. Consider talking with neighboring dairies about sharing workers if one dairy finds themselves in a worker shortage crisis.

14. Make a critical supply contingency plan to identify alternative suppliers.

15. Strong leadership and effective communication from owners, managers, and supervisors on a daily basis is key to ensure non-disruption of milk production.

Worker hygiene practices

To keep your dairy safe from COVID-19, encourage your employees to do the following:

1. Encourage workers to wash their hands regularly both at work and at home. COVID-19 can be prevented from entering the cells on the skin by washing hands with soap for 20 seconds or more — the equivalent of singing the “Alphabet” song once or the “Happy Birthday” song twice.

When hand-washing is not feasible, provide hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. This information is readily available on the back of all hand sanitizer bottles.

Workers should avoid touching their eyes, nose, and mouth. Urge workers to practice covering their mouths and noses when coughing or sneezing, and to dispose of any used tissues.

2. Remind your workers that prevention does not stop at work. Encourage workers to continue practicing good hand-washing hygiene at home and to frequently disinfect touched surfaces. Other suggestions include: enhancing ventilation by opening windows and doors; creating an emergency contact list; assigning a room in the house to separate sick household members; stocking up on nonperishable food items and hygiene products, enough for 14 days; and, if they have children dismissed from school or daycare, learning about their plan for continued education.

One important practice to encourage is social distancing. Urge workers to cancel nonessential travel, events, or social gatherings — this includes crowds with 10 or more people.

In the case of large households consisting of related and nonrelated farm coworkers, encourage them to agree on a consistent COVID-19 prevention plan for the household. Remind them that the actions of one person can have consequences for the rest of the household, including the elderly and those with compromised immune systems and chronic medical conditions.

3. Know COVID-19 symptoms. Encourage workers to avoid close contact with sick people. Symptoms appear two to 14 days after exposure.

Here are the most prevalent symptoms:

- Fever (above 99.5°F or 37.5°C)
- Dry cough
- Shortness of breath

Advise your workers to seek medical care immediately for evaluation if they believe they are sick. Workers should be advised to report any symptoms to dairy management as soon as possible. Prevention of transmission of COVID-19 among dairy farm workers is vital. Supervisors should interact with each worker daily to assess any signs or symptoms of COVID-19. This practice will reinforce a proactive prevention culture on the farm. 🐄

The authors are an associate professor and a research coordinator at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.