

Heaven on Earth rescue farm in Bethlehem Twp. linked to illness outbreak

Frank Warner

Visitors to the popular Heaven on Earth animal rescue farm in Bethlehem Township have come down with a variety of stomach illnesses linked to the farm, state health officials said Friday.

"At least five laboratory-confirmed cryptosporidium infections and at least six compatible illnesses have been associated with this farm," the state Department of Health said Friday in a health advisory.

The gastrointestinal illnesses can cause serious diarrhea, cramps and vomiting, the department said.

Hundreds of people may have been exposed to infected young goats and calves in the last four or five weeks since the public was invited to help feed the animals at the 3868 Bethman Road farm just east of Route 33, the advisory noted.

The Health Department is asking that all those who became ill after visiting the farm contact the department at 877-PA-HEALTH and consult their personal doctors.

Meanwhile, Heaven on Earth Farm owner Jahjah Melhem announced Friday the farm is no longer open to the public.

"In the past four years, Heaven on Earth Farm has had the pleasure of meeting so many of you. There has been a ton of love and support that visited the property at any given time," Melhem says on the farm's Facebook page. "We have decided that it is in our best interest to close the farm to the public so that we can focus on the well-being of the animals."

He said he is working with the Health Department to determine the origin of the reported sicknesses. He said he isn't sure anyone was infected at the farm, but it is possible.

"People come every day with their kids and we never had a problem," Melhem said. "I'm fine. I'm here every day. Three or four women are here every day and none of them are sick."

The farm has attracted 600 people since mid-February to help Melhem with 30 baby goats he rescued to avoid their slaughter. He asked for volunteers, he said, because the goats needed bottle-feeding four times a day.

On Thursday, a Health Department researcher told him she had three or four cases of people who visited the farm becoming sick later. Since then, the department has associated additional illnesses with the farm.

To help prevent a spread of the infections, those sickened after the Heaven on Earth visits should wash their hands frequently and, in some cases, they should avoid working in food services, schools and other group settings, officials said.

The Health Department is focusing on the cryptosporidium parasite as the main culprit in the illnesses.

"Cryptosporidium can be found in water, food, soil or on surfaces and dirty hands that have been contaminated with the feces of humans and animals infected with the parasite," the department's advisory says.

The parasite is spread by "the fecal-oral route," the advisory says. Someone touches feces, possibly on materials contaminated by animal droppings or human diarrhea, and then the infection enters the body by touching the mouth.

The department encourages hand washing with hot water. Its advisory says hand sanitizer is not adequate; even the chlorine in swimming pools is not enough to kill the parasite.

For most people, the cryptosporidium infection lasts up to 20 days while the body fights it off, the advisory says. But in people with weaker immune systems, such as those with HIV infections, the parasite can have more serious complications, including death.

In its four years, the Heaven on Earth Farm has rescued 75 to 80 animals, Melhem said. Among the animals are goats, sheep, pot-bellied pigs, sows, alpacas, donkeys, peacocks, cows and bulls.

SOURCE: <http://www.mcall.com/news/local/bethlehem/mc-heaven-on-earth-farm-illnesses-investigated-20170317-story.html>