FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE

INFORMATION FOR WORKERS

Foot and mouth disease (FMD) is spreading again, following a long absence. The disease has been detected within the European Union in Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. It will probably spread to other countries. For this reason we attempt to answer a number of questions:

WHAT IS FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE?

FMD is a viral disease spread throughout the world. It affects ruminants (cattle, sheep, goats and wild animals) and pigs. The animals suffer and may die.

IS FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE DANGEROUS TO WORKERS?

Humans can rarely catch FMD or after infection become FMD carriers without being ill and so transmit the virus. Workers who come into contact with FMD-infected animals or who work in areas in which the virus is being transmitted, i.e. through the air, may produce antibodies against the virus. These workers have the disease, but do not have any symptoms. As carriers of the virus they are a danger to animals. For this reason all unnecessary contact with animals should be avoided; as should contact with colleagues and other active farmers.

Particular caution should be exercised in the weeks following contact with workers and active farmers from FMD regions. Meetings should be limited as far as possible. If employers give instructions which go against this recommendation, your local trade union can help.

WHY IS FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE DANGEROUS?

Because FMD is transmitted rapidly, it is important to act quickly. FMD is a significant economic issue, because a ban is normally imposed on imports from affected countries. This has a significant impact on the job security of workers in sectors such as farming, slaughterhouses and the meat processing industry.

The epidemic can mean the end for affected companies. In the event of a case of FMD – or in some member states even a suspected case – all stocks are slaughtered. This means that not only affected animals are slaughtered, but also animals such as horses which may be carriers.

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HOW IS THE VIRUS TRANSMITTED?

The FMD virus is always transmitted directly, from animal to animal, animal to human or human to animal - within a shed, at a market or during transport.

The virus can be transmitted through water, air, milk, meat or kitchen waste. Even so-called smear infections through contaminated objects and equipment are possible. Therefore humans can pick up the virus on clothing, cars or other items and infect animals.

In hot, cold, dry or damp conditions the virus can survive and be transmitted for months. This is one of the particular dangers of the FMD virus.

The pathogens generally infect the animals via the mucous membranes (e.g. in the mouth). Before the disease is detected in the animals, the pathogens are secreted through mucus, saliva or milk, or transmitted through semen, which can lead to infection of hundreds of thousands of other animals.

Humans can also be infected through so-called smear infections of mouth and hands or droplet infection (through the inhalation of the FMD virus).

CAUSE AND PREVENTION

The FMD virus is extremely resistant. It can survive for months on dry clothing, sacks, straw, hay, etc. It also remains active for months in soil, waste water and waste. There are only a few targeted ways of killing the virus, e.g.

• Disinfection (using acids or lye)
• Heat treatment for over 30 minutes at temperatures over 60 °C

One method of prevention is a comprehensive immunisation program; this is currently being debated intensively in the EU.

INCUBATION PERIOD

The incubation period is the time between infection and the outbreak of the disease. In sheep it is 1-6 days, in pigs 1-12 days and in cattle 1-7 days, rarely longer.

The incubation period in humans is 2-8 days.

TREATMENT

There is currently no effective treatment, which is why vigilance is vital. Discussing the matter with colleagues or distributing this leaflet can improve safety.

(Note: therapy in humans only symptomatic. With extensive skin lesions possibly cover with antibiotics)

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms in humans: general symptoms like a flu infection. Liquid filled vesicles like a herpes infection, painful vesicles in the mouth, throat and fingers and toes. CAUTION: This is for the profane hard to distinguish between flu and FMD. Since it is almost certain to be a flu, there is no reason to worry about.

Nevertheless, persons with suspected FMD should seek immediate medical attention and indicate any contact with infected animals or animals suspected of infection.
FMD is an acute, painful disease causing fever. Affected animals suffer. FMD starts with small growths and blisters in the mouth and on the udders. It then affects the gullet and the stomach. The animals’ hooves are often affected.

**Symptoms in cattle:** Fever of up to 42 °C in the initial days, followed by loss of appetite and drooling (long threads of saliva). Blisters appear on the inner side of the lips, on the gums and the tongue and then between the hooves. Dairy cows suffer a sudden decrease in milk production. Young calves often perish (up to 70%).

**Symptoms in pigs:** First blisters appear on the hooves, snout and mucous membranes in the mouth, and then on the teats. Animals become lame from the pain and refuse to stand up. Young piglets often perish without showing any signs of the disease.

**Symptoms in sheep:** The disease has fewer symptoms, generally the only noticeable one is lameness in the animals. This is followed by blisters on the mouth and lips.

**WHAT SHOULD WORKERS DO IF THEY SUSPECT A CASE OF FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE?**

Contact the veterinarian immediately. Keep visitors and non-essential staff away from the animals. It is an offence to try to hide the disease.

Persons with suspected FMD should seek immediate medical attention and indicate any contact with infected animals or animals suspected of infection.

**WORKERS ARE PROTECTED**

European food, agriculture and tourism trade unions can provide their members with further information on Foot and Mouth Disease and other animal diseases. The addresses of the national trade unions can be obtained from EFFAT.

**EFFAT – European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism trade unions**

EFFAT is the European umbrella organisation for trade unions in the food, agriculture and tourism sectors and represents approximately 120 member organisations in 35 countries with about 2.5 million members.

It co-ordinates European activities of the member organisations and represents their interests to the European institutions. It is a member of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the European regional organisation of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF).

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European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism trade unions, Rue Fossé-aux-Loups 38, BE 1000 Bruxelles – www.effat.org

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