

## HEALTH

### Maricopa County Fair to forgo petting zoo after E. coli outbreak

**Perry Vandell and Robert Anglen** Arizona Republic

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#### Key Points

- The Maricopa County Fair will not have a petting zoo or pony rides this year because of public health concerns.
  - This decision follows an E. coli outbreak at last year's Arizona State Fair that hospitalized multiple children.
  - While some strains of E. coli are harmless, others can cause severe illness, including kidney failure.
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The Maricopa County Fair will forgo a petting zoo and pony rides after last year's State Fair saw an E. coli outbreak that hospitalized multiple children.

“Out of an abundance of caution and in response to public concern, the Maricopa County Fair has made the decision that while there will be plenty of livestock exhibits and displays this year, there will be no direct public animal contact,” executive director Karen Searle told The Arizona Republic.

Searle didn't say whether the decision was directly tied to the State Fair's outbreak but appeared to suggest the absence of physical contact between patrons and animals wouldn't necessarily be permanent.

“As with all of our programs, we continually evaluate our exhibits and attractions to ensure we are providing a safe, educational, and enjoyable experience for our guests, while also prioritizing animal welfare and the health and safety of the public and our exhibitors,” Searle said.

She added that, while fairgoers wouldn't be allowed to touch the animals, livestock remained a key part of the fair with plenty of opportunities to see animals up close while exhibitors shared their knowledge.

### **How dangerous is E. coli?**

**E. coli** is the shortened name of a bacterium called *Escherichia coli*. It is found in the environment, foods and intestines of people and animals. Some strains of *E. coli* aren't dangerous, but others can be fatal. It can cause infections, pneumonia and kidney failure.

*E. coli* typically spreads through contact with contaminated food, but it can be transmitted through people or animals.

Most people infected with *E. coli* experience diarrhea, severe stomach cramps and vomiting and recover within one week. Children younger than five, older adults and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to develop hemolytic uremic syndrome.

**Exposed:** [How effort to prevent E. coli at AZ petting zoos went down the drain](#)

### **Decision to avoid petting zoos follows E. coli outbreak at 2025 State Fair**

Health concerns over the safety of petting zoos and similar attractions arose after a Republic investigation uncovered how at least eight children were hospitalized with the infection.

Multiple parents reported that their children became sick after coming in contact with a pig at the fair's petting zoo. Dozens were sickened, several with acute kidney failure.

As the number of cases rose in October and November, [the Arizona Department of Health Services did not disclose potential sources](#), the number of cases, the geographic spread or any potential connections. [E. coli test results showed state and county health officials were aware](#) that the Arizona State Fair was the source of the outbreak, even as they withheld details from the public.

State Fair officials later confirmed the petting zoo exhibit didn't have any handwashing stations with soap and running water attached nearby. There were hand-washing stations and full restrooms inside the building, but hand sanitizer, which does not eliminate some strains of E. coli, was all that was available at the petting zoo itself.

**No announcement:** [As E. coli outbreak spread, Arizona officials didn't notify the public](#)

### **Effort to establish safeguards at petting zoos died**

Arizona lawmakers introduced a bill earlier this year that would have added safeguards to lower the risk of similar outbreaks from occurring.

[Senate Bill 1082](#) sought to require commercial petting zoos restrict access to animals and ensure patrons wash their hands upon leaving. It would have prohibited outside food from being brought into the petting zoo and called for signage warning of risks.

"The evidence clearly shows petting zoos are a high risk," Sen. John Kavanagh, R-Fountain Hills, who sponsored the bill, previously said. "We know one infected animal could spread it to 100 people."

But the bill ultimately died after a Senate Committee on Natural Resources hearing ended with a 4-4 vote, as proposals fail to advance on tie votes in the Arizona Legislature.

Sen. Frank Carroll, R-Sun City West, suggested without evidence that children who suffered kidney failure as a result of the infection had some kind of pre-existing condition.

Meanwhile, Sen. Janae Shamp, R-Surprise, who is a registered nurse, simply voted "nay."