

Orf on the Farm

What is Orf?

Orf is an infection caused by a parapox virus. This virus is most frequently found in sheep and goats. Orf is a zoonotic disease, which means it can pass between animals and humans. It is not possible for humans to pass the virus on to each other.

How is Orf spread?

Orf infections in humans usually occur when broken skin comes into contact with the virus from infected animals or contaminated equipment. Activities that can put you at risk include:

- Petting or having casual contact with infected animals
- Bottle feeding, tube feeding, or shearing sheep or goats.
- Handling infected equipment such as a harness
- Being bitten by an infected animal.

Orf virus infections do not generate enduring immunity so you can be infected multiple times over your lifetime.

Where is Orf found on the farm?

Orf virus can be found on sheep or goats or contaminated equipment. It is most common in young lambs and their ewes and older lambs in the late summer. The animals may have visible lesions in the mouth/muzzle area, but can also spread the virus without any visible lesions.

How can I prevent the spread of Orf and other germs from animals to humans?

The organism can survive for long periods in the environment, and because animals may be infected but not have symptoms, these guidelines should be followed:

- Pregnant women, immune compromised persons, or those with prosthetic heart valves should ideally not have contact with the herd
- Limit visitor access to animals. Personal protective equipment (PPE) is required to enter animal housing areas.
- Wash hands frequently, especially after direct contact with animals or animal by-products.
- When handling sheep or goats wear gloves and other protective clothing (e.g., coveralls). This is especially important when you have open cut or sore.
- Always remove soiled clothing and boots before entering the house.

What are the symptoms?

Infection with Orf is usually confined to the top layer of the skin. Lesions or nodules will often occur on the fingers, hand or the forearms. After an incubation period of 5-6 days, they begin as small papules that will become ulcerative in nature. Other symptoms include a mild fever, fatigue, or local swelling of the lymph nodes. Lesions can be painful but usually resolve on their own without scarring.

How long does it last?

In most cases, orf clears up by itself in about 6 weeks.

What should I do if I have symptoms?

Currently there is no approved treatment for an orf virus infection. However, the lesions can become infected with bacteria if not properly managed. The lesion should be kept dry and covered to prevent a secondary infection with bacteria. While working with animals or during manual labor in which the lesion might get wet, use a watertight bandage. To promote healing, a non-weeping sore can be uncovered at bedtime or covered loosely if still weeping.

References:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/poxvirus/orf-virus/people.html>

Dermnet New Zealand: <https://www.dermnetnz.org/topics/orf/>

National Health Services – UK: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/orf/>