

COVID-19: Is Your Pet at Risk From the Coronavirus?

by Jodi Helmer 

Reviewed by Emily Swiniarski, DVM. Updated on 06.02.2020



- Currently, there is no evidence that transmission from pets to people or from pet-to-pet is part of the COVID-19 outbreak.
 - IDEXX Laboratories tested thousands of canine and feline specimens for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, and found no cases in pets.
 - Misinformation about how the virus spreads has put some pets at risk.
 - Keep pets safe by continuing to care for them. Stay in touch with your veterinarian.
 - While following social distancing guidelines in your community, try to exercise your pet two-to-three times per day.
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For more facts and preparedness tips, jump down to the infographic at the bottom of the page.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has made national and international headlines. Thousands of cases of the virus, which causes flu-like symptoms, including **fever, cough and shortness of breath**, have been confirmed since the disease was first diagnosed in Wuhan, China, on December 30, with numbers and death tolls continuing to escalate.

The virus has since all over the world and claimed the lives of over 370,000 people, leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare the fast-spreading virus, also known as COVID-19, a “**public health emergency of international concern.**” In March of 2019, **WHO officially declared the virus a pandemic.**

Can Pets Contract COVID-19?

As organizations like the WHO and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) work to understand the virus and control the spread, questions are popping up about whether we should also be concerned about COVID-19 and our pets.

“There is no evidence that transmission [from pets to people] or from pet-to-pet is part of the current outbreak,” says Dr. Kate E Creevy, veterinarian and Mark Chapman Chair in Shelter Medicine and Companion Animal Health at **Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine**.

IDEXX Laboratories, a global veterinary diagnostics firm, tested thousands of canine and feline specimens for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, and **found no cases in pets**. The test results align with the current beliefs that the virus is primarily transmitted from person-to-person and supports the recommendation against testing pets at this time.

There have been **only a few reports** of pets testing positive for the coronavirus worldwide.

Two cats in New York State became the first pets in the U.S. to test positive for the virus. The cats live in separate parts of the state and may have contracted the virus from their owners or outside influences—at least one of the cats spends time outdoors. Though the felines showed mild signs of respiratory illness, both cats are expected to make a full recovery.

A **pug in North Carolina** is thought to be the first dog to test positive for the virus. The dog was living with a family that contracted COVID-19, and was tested for the virus as part of a Duke University Study. The family told CNN that the dog had a slight cough for a day or two and was disinterested in food, but explained that the symptoms

were not alarming. Researchers do not know whether COVID-19 caused the dog's symptoms.

A cat in Belgium also tested positive for COVID-19, about a week after its owner started showing symptoms of the virus. The cat did display symptoms including vomiting, diarrhea, and shortness of breath, but it is unconfirmed whether the virus caused these symptoms.

A Pomeranian in Hong Kong tested “weak positive” for the virus. The owner was diagnosed with COVID-19 and is believed to have passed it along to the dog. The dog exhibited no signs of illness. The Pomeranian **died shortly after being released from quarantine**, but experts do not believe the coronavirus had any impact on the death of the 17-year-old dog, who had underlying health conditions and outlived the average life expectancy of a Pomeranian.

The South China Post also confirmed that a second dog, a 2-year-old German Shepherd, **tested positive for the virus in Hong Kong.** The dog belongs to a 30-year-old COVID-19 patient living in the Pok Fu Lam area. The German Shepherd has since been quarantined. Another mixed breed dog from the same household tested negative for the virus, and is also being monitored in quarantine. Neither dog showed signs of illness.

These are isolated cases of human to animal transmission, which does not appear to be common. Health authorities still say there is **no evidence that pets can transmit the virus to humans.**

Understanding Coronavirus in Pets



Even though COVID-19 is not believed to pose a significant threat to pets, dogs and cats can be diagnosed with other strains of the coronavirus.

Coronavirus is part of a family of viruses that can cause intestinal and respiratory infections, including canine respiratory disease (also known as kennel cough) and often goes hand-in-hand with other viruses, including distemper, Bordetella, and influenza.

Creevy notes that coronavirus symptoms in pets often include mild diarrhea that gets better on its own. Some animals might not show signs of illness at all.

In cats, it can lead to a more aggressive and deadly form of the virus, known as **Feline Infectious Peritonitis or FIP**, which includes symptoms ranging from fever and weight loss to liver disease. Less than 1 percent of cats infected with the feline coronavirus develop FIP.

To prevent the spread of a common coronavirus infection pet parents should:

- Vaccinate against preventable infections such as distemper, Bordetella and influenza
- Protect pets from parasites like heartworms and fleas
- Limit contact with ill dogs and cats

Your veterinarian can recommend appropriate vaccinations for your pet.

“There is a vaccine for common intestinal coronavirus, but it’s seldom recommended [because] the illness is so mild—or undetectable—in most dogs and cats,” Creevy says. “It’s been hard to prove that the vaccine is beneficial.”

COVID-19: Still Potentially Dangerous for Pets

Although **pets cannot pass on the new coronavirus to their owners**, rampant misinformation about the spread of the virus has led to a dire situation for dogs and cats in China.

Fears that pets can spread the coronavirus has led to demands that residents get rid of their pets and threats of mass euthanasia, according to **an article in the Daily Mail**. Humane Society International **published photos** of 11 abandoned puppies left without food, water, or shelter amid reports that coronavirus in dogs could be a problem. Rescue groups saved the puppies.

WHO launched a campaign to **dispel the myths surrounding the coronavirus**, stressing that there is no

evidence that cats and dogs can be infected with the virus.

In China, pets are at risk for another reason. NBC News **reported** that the coronavirus outbreak led residents to flee the city of Wuhan, leaving their pets behind. The city has been on lockdown since January 23 in hopes of preventing the spread of the virus, which means left-behind pets have been on their own without food or water for weeks.

Although there is no evidence that animal-to-human transmission of COVID-19 is possible, the **Associated Press cited a source from the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department in Hong Kong** who said, “...Under no circumstances should [pet owners] abandon their pets.”

Local rescue groups estimate there could be up to 30,000 animals in the city with no one to care for them. Shelter volunteers are working to save as many companion animals as possible, according to the article.

Can Face Masks for Dogs Really Help?

Pet owners concerned about protecting their pets from the Wuhan coronavirus have been purchasing face masks for their dogs. One manufacturer told **USA TODAY** that sales of the masks have spiked up to 400 percent since the outbreak.

Michael San Filippo, a spokesperson for the American Veterinary Medical Association suggests holding off on purchasing protective gear for dogs and cats. “The effectiveness of face masks for healthy people is a bit unclear and it’s even less clear for dogs,” he says. “At this time, there’s no reason to believe face masks are necessary for dogs.”

Precautions for Pet Owners

Although concerns that pets can be infected with COVID-19 are unfounded, Creevy still recommends caution and suggests the following advice:

- Keep pets well-fed and vaccinated to bolster their immune systems
- Wash your hands after contact with animals
- Avoid interacting with ill animals
- Steer clear of areas that have feces from other animals

“Dealing with emerging viruses is always difficult, because when a new virus emerges, we cannot predict its behavior,” she says. “It’s ok to pay attention to emerging news but it’s even more important for pet owners to understand the things that we already know [about] the common coronavirus in pets.”

COVID-19 and Pet Preparedness

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to quarantines and closures that could make it harder to get pet supplies. Dr. Dana Varble, chief veterinary officer for the North American Veterinary Community (NAVC), recommends preparing by keeping a supply of food, treats, medications,

and other essentials on hand as part of your emergency preparedness efforts.

“We often take for granted that we can just run to the store but that might not be possible,” Varble says.

You should make a plan that includes directives for your pet’s care if you get sick or need hospitalization. Varble advises double checking that pets are up to date on all of their vaccines in case boarding is required.

“There is no reason to panic, you just want to be prepared and your pets should always be included in your emergency preparedness planning,” she says.

To take the pressure off of local veterinary clinics and to avoid unnecessary contact with other people, **Dr. Sarah Wallace** says to consider rescheduling regular wellness appointments. “If your pet is scheduled for a routine exam during this crisis, postpone the appointment,” she says. “Pet parents concerned about whether or not their pet is sick enough to go into a veterinary hospital should consider a telemedicine consult.”

However, if your pet is sick or experiencing an emergency, don’t hesitate to get them the care they need. “If you absolutely need to go to the veterinary hospital, you should do it,” adds Wallace. “Call the hospital you are planning to go to before you arrive and let them know you are coming.”

Advice for Keeping Pets Enriched at Home

During this time of uncertainty, many pet parents will be spending more time at home with their dogs and cats. And it’s important to keep pets enriched, entertained, and busy if regular outings or playdates are postponed.

“Try to get them exercise 2-3 times per day if possible,” says Wallace. “Use your extra time together to teach your pets some new tricks. If you have a backyard your dog can play in, use it.”

See Also: The Best Pet Toys for At-Home Play

Don't let fears you may be feeling prevent you from spending quality time with your four-legged companion.

“Your pet likely senses your stress about the pandemic and will in turn feel stressed,” says Wallace. “Exercise, food, some kind of regularity in their daily schedule, exercise and the love of their human should help reduce their anxiety—and yours too.”

Infographic: The Coronavirus and Pets