

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Best practices for Pet Group Settings

Background

Coronaviruses are a large group of viruses that can cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to more serious respiratory infections like pneumonia. Since first identified in December 2019, the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2, the cause of COVID-19) has caused illness in people across the globe and is now considered a pandemic. While suspected to be of animal origin, COVID-19 now appears to be spread predominately or exclusively from close contact with an infected person. There is a concern that animals (especially household pets) could become sick with the virus or spread it; however, information so far does not show this to have occurred. The virus can survive for a short time on surfaces (estimated to be hours to a few days). Therefore, it is possible that surfaces contaminated with the virus (including pets) could be a source of illness for people.

Best Practices to Protect the Health of Staff and Animals (Pet Group Settings)

Based on current knowledge of COVID-19, the following steps should be considered for pet group settings (e.g., veterinary clinics, doggie day care, boarding facilities, shelters).

1. Develop/update an infection control plan for the facility.

This does not have to be an extensive, all-inclusive, plan, but having something in writing that everyone can refer to is critical. A number of resources are available to assist you (see Resources); many include example procedures critical to COVID-19 prevention (e.g., hand cleaning, surface cleaning and disinfection, use of animal isolation, screening pets/owners) that can be quickly adapted and put in-place.

2. Prioritize keeping sick people (and their pets if reasonable) out of the facility.

To be effective, this should include front-end staff using a list of simple screening questions for all customers coming to the facility prior to entering. Screening questions should include the following: within the past 2 weeks have any people in the household had a cough, fever (feeling feverish or shakes and chills), or difficulty breathing. People that say yes to any of these questions are considered at high-risk for COVID-19 and additional steps must be taken to protect facility staff. Signs with this information should be posted outside the facility as well.

As it is possible pets of people with COVID-19 can get the virus on them, it is best to keep these animals out of the facility while the person is under isolation. When this is not

possible (e.g, health emergencies, shelters), steps should be taken to reduce risks to staff (see Resources). For all customers, but especially anyone who is ill, ideally all communication should occur over the phone/computer (if in-person is necessary, then from a distance of at least 2 meters - 6 feet).

All sick staff should also stay away from the facility until they are no longer ill.

3. Focus on key personal and social practices that all staff and clients/customers should do.

Ensure all staff are following all practices recommended by public health. This includes frequent hand cleaning (soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer), avoiding unnecessary contact with people (e.g., shaking hands), avoiding contact with people who are sick, frequently cleaning and disinfecting common touch surfaces and objects, staying home when sick, and following social distancing recommendations (remain at least 2 meters - 6 feet from others, avoid crowded places). Simple changes such as closing waiting areas (people drop off animals outside and wait in cars/outside and only enter to pay), disallowing walk-ins, and eliminating the need for signatures and exchanges of cash payment can go a long way.

Staff should be sure to only wear dedicated clothing while working (washing at the end of each day). Staff having close contact with ill people or their pets should use appropriate personal protective equipment, such as disposable gloves, gowns, and masks (see Resources).

4. Plan ahead.

Many critical items are currently or are expected to be in short supply (e.g., disinfectants, masks, alcohol-based hand sanitizer). Staff should carefully monitor stock, use carefully and plan for alternatives. Follow reputable websites (see Resources) for recommended approaches to address limited supplies or alternatives. Reschedule anything elective, as able, to conserve supplies.

5. Stay positive.

This is easier said than done; however, needs to be on every team leader's mind as a priority. Staff morale and personal wellness are likely to suffer during the coming months. Any steps that can be taken to offset this slide is especially important.

Resources

Infection control planning for animal group settings AAHA infection control, prevention, and biosecurity guidelines:
<https://www.aaha.org/>

Infectious disease in dogs in group settings:
<http://go.osu.edu/IDk9risk>

Infection prevention and control best practices for small animal veterinary clinics:
<https://www.wormsandgermsblog.com/resources-pets/>

COVID-19 and Pets

AVMA (COVID-19 FAQ):
<https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/animal-health-and-welfare/covid-19>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - Animals and COVID-19:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/animals.html>

Clinician's Brief COVID-19 Updates (includes algorithm for high-risk owner contacts):
<https://www.cliniciansbrief.com/covid-19-updates>

Info Sheet: Coronaviruses at the Human-Animal Interface: https://www.cahss.ca/media/uploads/CEZD/documents/20-02-18_16-24/Infosheet_-_Coronaviruses_at_the_Human-Animal_Interface.pdf

OIE World Organization for Animal Health: <https://www.oie.int/en/scientific-expertise/specific-information-and-recommendations/questions-and-answers-on-2019-novel-coronavirus/>

Worms & Germs Blog (COVID-19 posts):
<https://www.wormsandgermsblog.com/tags/covid-19/>

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