

COVID-19 FAQ for Shelters

Answers to frequently asked questions about pets and SARS CoV-2 and COVID-19

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General

Q: Are pets at risk of contracting COVID-19 from humans and are humans at risk from pets?

A: It is important to remember that human beings remain the greatest risk to other humans.

There is evidence that some pets (dogs, cats, and ferrets) living with a COVID-19 positive human can be infected with the virus, but it appears to be uncommon. None of the dogs naturally or experimentally infected showed any signs of illness. Cats and ferrets appear to be more susceptible to infection, with some infected animals showing clinical signs of disease.

The risk to humans is unknown at this point but is considered to be low. Millions of people have tested positive for this virus all over the world, yet a very small number of animals have tested positive. This situation is rapidly evolving with new information coming daily so it is prudent to act out of an abundance of caution to protect both pets and humans. People who are sick should protect their pets like any other family member and limit contact while they are ill.

Q: Should pets be removed from the homes of COVID-19 positive people?

A: Pets should remain in their homes, with their families (this includes foster families), whenever possible. Because infection of a pet from a human is possible, though uncommon, people should protect their pets, in

the same way they would protect another person living in the house- by minimizing contact until recovered. If an infected person lives alone with their pet but is still well enough to care for them, they should minimize contact as much as possible, wear a mask and use good hand hygiene, but the pet should remain in the home.

It is critical that every person has a plan for their pet in the event they become ill or hospitalized. Identify several friends, relatives, or neighbors who are willing to care for the pet if needed. Prepare a pet supply kit with food, medicines, vaccination records, leashes, veterinary contact information, etc. If the pet cannot stay in the home, it is highly preferred that a friend or family member care for the pet rather than surrender or return to a shelter.

Shelters can help share this message with their communities via their websites, social media, news, etc. [Here is an example](#) of how Wisconsin Humane Society is getting the word out. Shelters and communities should work to support the human-animal bond by providing food, urgent veterinary care, or other needed resources in order to help keep pets with their families.

Q: Should we vaccinate pets with the available coronavirus vaccines to protect against COVID-19?

A: No. While there are vaccines for some coronaviruses that affect animals, including dogs and cats, these are different viruses from SARS-CoV-2 which causes COVID-19. The use of existing coronavirus vaccines is not expected to provide cross-protection for COVID-19.

Q: Why are we stressing keeping cats and kittens out of the shelter?

A: While there is always an emphasis on keeping cats and kittens out of the shelter, it is particularly important during the current pandemic for several reasons.

Research studies demonstrated that experimentally infected cats (and ferrets) may be more susceptible to infection with COVID-19 than other pets. Importantly, they also reported spread to non-infected cats housed next to infected cats. This brings up the concern for shelters where numerous cats may be housed in close confinement. It is important to note that this information is from an experimental setting, where the infectious dose (amount of virus given to the cats) was extremely high and not necessarily consistent with what would happen with natural infection. This may be due to the lack of testing that has been done thus far, therefore an abundance of caution is warranted and all efforts should be made to keep healthy cats out of the shelter.

Additionally, caring for animals in the shelter brings humans into close contact. Any congregating of animals increases the risk to both animals and humans.

Neonatal kittens require intensive care and therefore high staffing levels which are in conflict with recommendations to limit and rotate staffing in the shelter and maintenance of social distancing. Therefore, it is particularly important that a clear message is delivered to the public that *no healthy kittens will be admitted to the shelter during the current crisis*. With very limited exceptions, healthy kittens are not in crisis and do not require intervention. As with other baby animals that are found, healthy kittens by definition almost certainly are being cared for by a mother cat. The risk created by intervention outweighs the benefit in most cases at the best of times: the best course for healthy baby animals is to allow the mother to continue providing care.

Q: Why shouldn't we do spay/neuter if we already have staff in the building and have enough PPE?

A: There are several reasons why routine spay/neuter surgeries should be limited during this pandemic:

- Most surgeries require staff to be in closer proximity to each other than what would be necessary for other animal care duties. This increases risk of exposure to staff and also to every person with whom staff interacts outside of the shelter.
- There is no way of knowing how long the PPE shortage will last. The use of PPE today for a routine surgery may mean that PPE will not be available for truly emergency animal cases or be needed in the human healthcare field.

Q: I've heard about human hospitals asking for supplies from veterinarians. We don't have a ventilator or N-95 masks, so we don't have anything they need, right?

A: Human medical professionals are in need of many supplies that animal shelters, veterinary clinics, and even the average person may have. These include:

- Disposable gloves, exam or surgical
- Procedure/surgical face masks
- Thermometers
- Eye protection (goggles or face shields)
- Hand sanitizer, sanitizing wipes
- Disinfectant
- N-95 or N-99 masks

- Gowns
- Tyvek coveralls

Please contact your local healthcare organization to donate- you could save a life.

Q: How can I keep my staff safe at the shelter?

A: Shelters must take a multi-faceted approach to keep people safe in the shelter:

- Limit the number of people in the shelter at any one time by implementing the following measures:
 - Limit the animals in care to those that truly need sheltering and have no alternative, allowing shelters to minimize the number of staff required to care for them
 - Operate by appointment only for all services
 - Allow telecommuting for staff and volunteers with non-animal care roles
 - Postpone non-essential services (e.g. TNR, routine spay/neuter, wellness clinics, educational programs)
- Implement social distancing for everyone, not just public visitors.
- Require that people wear cloth masks, even if not currently mandated in your community.

Q: Our shelter doesn't have a veterinarian to give rabies vaccines. What are our options for vaccinating pets prior to foster or adoption?

A: While telemedicine can be utilized for many things during this pandemic, vaccinations are not one of them. If the animal has a history of previous rabies vaccination, check with local authorities for guidance on whether revaccination can be delayed. Rabies laws vary by state (and occasionally municipality), so it is important to be familiar with what is required and who is allowed to administer the vaccine. Most states require that a licensed veterinarian administer the vaccine. If that is the case in your state, and the animal has no known history of a rabies vaccine, there are several options *given the current state of emergency*.

1. Request a temporary order from local authorities to allow trained lay staff to give the vaccine.
2. Allow a trained lay staff member to give the vaccine. Given properly it should immunize the animal; however, it may not be legally recognized. The animal should be revaccinated by a veterinarian once shelter in place restrictions are lifted and veterinary services are fully restored.

Q: Telemedicine is not allowed in our state. What can we do?

A: Telemedicine has become an important tool for healthcare professionals, including veterinarians, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It allows veterinarians to continue to provide care for their patients while minimizing the spread of COVID-19. Guidance around the use of telemedicine varies by [state](#)- some states have loosened restrictions on requirements [such as not requiring an in-person examination to create a veterinary-client-patient-relationship (VCPR)] but many have not.

For those in states with strict limitations on telemedicine:

- Reach out to your state veterinary medical association and work together to submit a letter to the authorities requesting a temporary exemption.
- Contact your state veterinary medical board for their input and assistance.

Q: I understand that some domestic cats (and tigers and lions) have tested positive for COVID-19? I know cats can get other coronaviruses. Could these positive results be false positives because they had a different coronavirus?

A: This is an excellent question. The tests being used on animals to detect COVID-19 are RT-PCR tests. These specialized and very sensitive tests work by detecting specific parts of the virus's genetic material (RNA) in a sample. Although SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) is a coronavirus, it is sufficiently different from the feline and other known animal coronaviruses that the virologists are confident there is no cross-reactivity.

The test was developed using several genomic sequences that are unique to SARS-CoV-2 to ensure that the test would only detect that particular virus. Multiple samples that were known to be positive for feline coronavirus were then run to test for cross-reactivity. None was found, meaning the tests for SARS-CoV-2 were negative on samples that were positive for feline, canine and other animal coronaviruses, giving confidence that the available results from cats are not false positives due to cross-reactivity of the test.

Intake and Handling of COVID-19 Exposed Pets

Q: What should we do if we need to take in an animal from a COVID-19 exposed household?

A: Every effort should be made to allow companion animals to continue to cohabitatem with their family when possible. However, if temporary sheltering becomes necessary, [recommendations](#) are provided to ensure coordination with the appropriate public health and animal health officials and to minimize infection risk to shelter staff and volunteers. Each shelter must consider whether they have the capacity to care for these animals. While the risks of COVID-19 from contact with exposed animals are considered very low at this time, it is nonetheless prudent for shelters to use the best available information on general infection prevention for contagious diseases, including coronaviruses. A customizable template handling protocol is available [here](#).

Q: What sort of socialization of animals is permitted during the 14-day separation period? Can dogs be walked outside?

A: The need for socialization and interaction is still essential during this time and behavioral needs must still be met. Cats should be socialized while wearing PPE but close contact (kissing, snuggling) should be avoided. Dogs must be walked outside for elimination and exercise but direct contact with other companion animals should be avoided as a best practice to protect animal health.

- Feces should be collected using gloved hands or a bag and disposed of immediately. See handwashing information above.
- Ideally, these dogs should be walked in an area that can be readily sanitized in a dedicated area separate from the general animal population.

Q: What Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is recommended when handling COVID-19 exposed animals?

A: The [recommendations](#) for intake and handling of companion animals from households where humans with COVID-19 are present outline what PPE should be used for handling these animals- gloves and reusable PPE. Any sort of coveralls/gown/long-sleeved shirt and dedicated footwear that can be washed and reused is acceptable. Masks and eye protection are likely not necessary during routine handling of healthy animals, though wearing a reusable cloth mask while around other people is now [recommended by the CDC](#).

Veterinary personnel treating sick animals with exposure to a person with COVID-19 compatible symptoms should consult the [CDC website for PPE guidance](#).

Disposable, commercial PPE is only available in very limited quantities and must be reserved for the protection of human healthcare workers who

are facing enormous exposure working directly with infected people.

Additionally, it remains critical to clean hands often. Washing hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after handling a companion animal should be done. If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry. Finally, be sure that all folks using PPE are trained on [the appropriate way to put on and remove PPE](#).

Q: If we don't think the animals can spread COVID-19 on their fur, why are we using PPE?

A: There are two reasons for this recommendation. The first being, in an abundance of caution, all of the information needed to fully understand the risk between people and animals is not yet known. The other is to protect animals from human exposure.

Q: Do we need to use PPE during every interaction with an exposed animal during the 14-day separation period or just during intake?

A: In the abundance of caution model, the recommendation is yes, based on the information available at this time. All needed information about whether it is possible that animals can transmit the virus to people and to other animals is not yet available because of how difficult this is to prove in a non-experimental setting that resembles natural infection.

Q: Do we need to limit staff contact with all animals in the shelter or just exposed animals?

At this time, the interim recommendations apply only to exposed animals. However, because a significant percentage of infected people are asymptomatic, limiting close contact (e.g. snuggling, kissing, sharing food) with all animals is prudent to reduce the risk of a human infecting a previously unexposed pet.

Q: Do we need to treat all strays as exposed?

A: *No, at this point in time there is no indication to treat every stray as an exposed animal.* The current recommendation is to treat animals as exposed only if they are coming from a home with a known positive person.

Q: Should we expect an influx of intake from COVID-19 exposed homes?

A: So far there have been a very limited number of animals who have

come into shelters for this reason. This is likely due to encouraging pet owners to have plans for their pet just as they do for family members.

The best practice for shelters is to have plans for how to manage if/when exposed animals need to come in. It has been a bright spot to see how many animals are being absorbed and taken care of in the communities that are the most affected, however the peak has yet to be reached in many areas. Options for caring for these animals other than in the shelter include [friends/relatives caring for the pet](#), sheltering in place (cats) and working with [boarding facilities](#) to house them.

Finally, ensure that animals are included in all community emergency response plans/emergency operations centers (EOC's).

Q: Should sick animals be tested for COVID-19?

A: Neither the CDC, USDA, nor AVMA recommend that companion animals be routinely tested for COVID-19 at this time. The CDC states that the decision to test an animal (including companion animals, livestock, and wild or zoo animals) should be agreed upon using a One Health approach between appropriate local, state, and/or federal public health and animal health officials. More information on SARS CoV-2 testing in Animals can be found [here](#).

Release/Outcome

Q: Can I release an exposed pet back to its owner before the 14-day separation period ends?

A: Yes, every effort should be made to return the pet to their owner as quickly as possible. See the full [recommendations](#) for details.

Q: Can an exposed animal be adopted or sent to a foster home before the 14-day separation period ends?

A: In an abundance of caution, the recommendation is to keep the animal in the shelter for the full 14-day separation period. To avoid having to house the animals at the shelter for the full 14 days, encourage all members of the community and be sure all organizations in the community are communicating the same advice – to have a plan for your pet should your household no longer be able to care for your pet. Keeping pets out of the shelter is the best course of action to protect people and animals.

Q: Many Shelter in Place orders allow shelters to continue operations, but don't appear to permit the public to leave their

homes to adopt a pet. How can we ensure continued live outcomes for the animals that DO have to come into our shelter?

A: Acquiring a new pet is not considered an essential service under Shelter in Place orders, however, caring for animals in shelters and providing appropriate outcomes is. For animals that must be admitted to shelters (e.g. sick, injured, in danger) and that are not reclaimed by their owners, efforts should be made to find timely live outcomes that limit public movement to the shelter. This may be foster, transport to an [established partner \(ideally within the same community\)](#), or adoption in an adjusted way from normal times. Public movement and aggregation at the shelter can be avoided by using such practices as scheduled appointments and remote communication (e.g. video chat, emails, phone calls) as much as possible, as well as pet delivery!

Q: I understand that the recommendation has been made to [postpone non-essential surgeries](#) and our shelter is following this, but what about cat neuters? I don't think we will be able to find a foster parent or adopter willing to take an intact male cat into their home.

A: Excellent question. Unneutered male cats often come with a few behaviors that make them less likely to find a timely outcome from a shelter and work out well at that outcome. This can lead to shelter crowding, which comes with its own set of risks- including increased stress and illness and therefore more staff required to care for the cats and increased length of stay. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever to [limit shelter intake](#) to only those animals that have no alternative. [This includes kittens!](#)

The [Guidelines on Essential Medical and Surgical Care for Shelters & Spay/Neuter Clinics](#) note it is reasonable to proceed with a cat neuter for animals already in care as long as social distancing can be maintained. Thus, if the cat neuter can be performed by a single veterinarian using injectable anesthesia without other human assistance, it is reasonable to proceed. If an animal is injured and requires anesthesia for another reason (e.g. wound repair) proceeding with spay or neuter at the same time is also reasonable.

It is not recommended that shelters and S/N clinics take in public or community cats for neutering. Likewise, it is not prudent to bring staff into work solely for the purpose of a cat neuter. These activities increase the risk of exposure to all humans involved and so need to be postponed for now.

Q: What are the most important messages our shelter can share with

the public?

A: Pets can remain in the home with sick people and all cautions used to protect other members of the household (e.g. limited close contact, facemask use by sick individuals, thorough hand hygiene), should also be used to protect the pet). Also remember that at this time the risk of spreading the virus from pets to humans is considered very low and *the biggest risk to people is other people*.

Additionally, pets are a significant part of our families and communities. Thus, it is critical to have plans in place for pets at an individual and community level, just as we do for all members of the family during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When creating a plan for a pet be sure to:

- Identify people who could care for the pet(s) should all members of the household be unable to provide care. Have a conversation with these people to explain care and risks as they are understood at this time.
- Ensure pets have identification: collar with dog license and rabies tag or any other vanity style tag with owner information. Information can also be placed on the pet's cage depending on the type of pet.
- Place a list of pets in the home on the front door for emergency responders. Include a description of each animal, location in home or on the property, and any other pertinent information specific to each animal.
- Prepare a “go-bag” for all pets and check in with friends and family who might be able to help. The pack should include two weeks of food in a closed and wipeable container, medications, and a copy of medical records with the veterinarian’s contact information. This will give the caretaker of the pet ample time to find more of the pet’s most important supplies in the event it will be longer than two weeks that they are away from their home and family. Pet preparedness plans need to include house keys and written authority to enter the homes for pet care.