

Leptospirosis: A Human and Pet Health Concern

Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease that can affect humans and animals. With its increasing presence in our pet population and risk to human health, this summer is a perfect time to discuss this disease and its potential impact on you and your pet's life.

This bacteria is spread through urine or other bodily fluids of infected animals, and it can get into water or soil and survive for weeks to months. When these contaminated bodily fluids (most commonly urine), soil and/or water come into contact with human or pet mucous membranes like the eyes, nose or mouth, or through broken skin, its victim becomes infected. Drinking contaminated water can also cause lead to infection. Many infected wild and domestic animals can even continue to excrete the bacteria into the environment for months to years!

Pets that swim, hike, walk through contaminated water or soil, or drink from contaminated water can be exposed to this bacteria. Due to increased building developments in our once rural areas, even primarily indoor pets are being exposed to more wildlife that may carry the disease. So it's pretty clear to see, most pets are at risk!

The time between exposure to the bacteria and development of disease is usually one to two weeks, but can be as short as a few days or as long as one month or more. The signs of leptospirosis infection can vary and are often nonspecific. The most common symptoms in dogs includes fever, vomiting, diarrhea, decreased appetite, weakness and increased thirst and/or urination. Often blood work changes indicating liver and kidney abnormalities can prompt your veterinarian to perform further testing to rule out leptospirosis infection in your pet.

If your pet has been confirmed to have leptospirosis, the prognosis depends on the stage of disease at presentation and timing of medical intervention. This also poses a big concern for your family's health, as any bodily fluids from your infected pet has the potential to put you at risk. Pet owners should take steps to prevent themselves and others from becoming infected by eliminating exposure to infected body tissues and fluids, washing hands after handling the pet, using antibacterial cleaning solutions on contaminated surfaces, contacting their physician's office and ensuring the infected pet is taking all medications as directed.

At the end of the day, the best thing we can do is try to prevent leptospirosis infection. This can be achieved through environmental rodent and wildlife control, as well as pet vaccination. The vaccine does not provide 100% protection as there are numerous strains of leptospirosis, however it does attempt to provide immunity to the most common pathogenic strains in our region. So as we continue to enjoy these warm summer months, please ensure you and your pets are staying safe while trying to keep cool.