

Swine Flu Risk Unknown For Small Pets And Pet Birds

As the H1N1 Flu (aka Swine Flu) spreads, some small pet owners and pet bird owners are wondering if their pets are at risk of contracting it.

By Marylou Zarbock

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Update: As of Dec. 22, the 2009 H1N1 influenza virus has been detected in humans, cats, ferrets, pigs, birds and most recently a dog in New York. So far, pets are believed to have contracted the virus from their owners. The American Veterinary Medical Association urges pet owners to monitor their pets' health very closely, no matter what type of animal, and visit a veterinarian if there are any signs of illness. The AVMA is tracking all instances of H1N1 in animals and posting updates on its website: http://www.avma.org/public_health/influenza/new_virus/default.asp.

Can pets contract H1N1, or Swine Flu? Pet owners started asking this question soon after the H1N1 Flu outbreak occurred. There is no simple answer. Scientists are still trying to understand the disease in humans.

"I think it is premature to be discussing this particular strain of swine flu in species other than swine or humans at this point," said Peter G. Fisher, the public relations committee chair for the Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians (AEMV). "Researchers at the CDC and WHO still do not have all the answers as to what to anticipate in humans in the next few weeks."

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) posted a page of frequently asked questions regarding the H1N1 Flu, and one question asked is whether pets can get H1N1 Flu. The answer states that it currently appears that H1N1 Flu is only transmitted person-to-person.

Cathy Johnson-Delaney, DVM, DABVP, and president of the AEMV, advocates caution, surveillance, good hygiene and common sense. "If you're sick with cold or flu, don't kiss your pet; don't handle your pet; wash your hands." In addition, if you're ill, don't visit a pet shelter.

Ferrets are the only common small mammal pet that's susceptible to human influenza. Johnson-Delaney said that there's no indication yet that ferrets would be any more susceptible to H1N1 than to any other type of human influenza. She stressed that people should use common sense and not get too riled up about H1N1. "The precautions that we put into place for ferrets during regular cold and flu season with people should be in effect." These precautions include not kissing or handling your pet when you're ill and washing your hands.

Although Avian Flu is one component of H1N1, Johnson-Delaney doesn't see it as a problem for pet birds. "As far as its possibility of passing to parrots or pet birds, probably not. Pet poultry, possibly," she said. "I don't think we have any indications that this is going to be a problem in poultry or even in pig production."

Johnson-Delaney also recommends that if your pet is ill, consult your veterinarian.

Although new details continue to emerge about H1N1, Johnson-Delaney tried to put the pet aspect into perspective. "We don't have any evidence of any crossing of [H1N1] into pet anything — in fact not even into agricultural in the United States at this point."