We at Ready Vet are focused on helping animal professionals to stay safe and best manage their patients when faced with threats, urgent situations, or disasters. The current Ebola epidemic is the largest Ebola virus outbreak in history, and in our highly mobile global society, presents a legitimate concern for all healthcare professionals.

As we watch the reports emerge this month on the need for substantial protective gear and advanced training for nurses and doctors faced with Ebola patients, many veterinary professionals are starting to ask questions such as, “Should we be preparing for potential Ebola cases at our hospital? and... Can Ebola even affect our animal patients?”

Also, we are well aware of how Americans will put their own lives at risk to save their animals as we saw during Katrina – thousands refused to evacuate because they couldn’t take their beloved pets with them, and many of them became casualties of the hurricane. As CNN shared this week, "The fear among health care workers, CDC officials, and others is that if people are afraid that their dogs are going to be killed, they might not come forward if they're starting to show some symptoms."

Due to these concerns, we wanted to share what we do know so far about Ebola and pets, so that you can work to alleviate the fears and questions of your team and clientele.

What do we know about Ebola and pets?

The reality is, we know very little about Ebola in household pets and there is a definite need for more research to be performed.

The studies that exist have focused on the infected wild animals that initiate an Ebola outbreak when humans interact with them, such as non-human primates and fruit bats in Africa. The person-to-person transmission during the resulting viral hemorrhagic fever disease that follows initial exposure is what leads to the spread of Ebola cases, not continued interactions with the initial infected animal.

How is Ebola transmitted?

The Ebola virus can be transmitted through direct contact with any bodily fluid from an infected person showing symptoms of the disease – including blood, vomit, saliva, tears, or diarrhea; contact with a contaminated needle or syringe; or contact with an infected animal – including ingesting infected meat. Although it is not considered an airborne or waterborne virus, the World Health Organization has also reported that there is some potential for Ebola transmission through coughing or sneezing if the bodily fluid lands on “mucus membranes or skin with cuts or abrasions of another person.”

If a household pet becomes infected with the Ebola virus, can it spread the disease?

The CDC has stated that, “Even in areas in Africa where Ebola is present, there have been no reports of dogs and cats becoming sick with Ebola. There is limited evidence that dogs become infected with Ebola virus, but there is no evidence that they develop disease.”

“Of over 300 dogs tested after a 2001 outbreak in Gabon, 9 to 25 percent showed antibodies to the virus (and
only 2 percent of dogs in the control group, who lived in France, showed the same). That means they were likely infected or at least exposed.” www.washingtonpost.com

Is it likely that infected pets will transmit Ebola to their owners or other animals in their home? Potentially not, but there is no supportive research available at this time. It is probably likely that they are more at risk for us transmitting the virus to them than vice versa as it is currently a human epidemic, not an animal one. However, just like with efforts to avoid the plague or other transmittable diseases, keeping animals indoors, controlling pets appropriately during outdoor excursions, avoiding interactions with live or dead wildlife, and keeping animals healthy through appropriate diet, exercise, and vaccinations will likely help them best avoid becoming infected or ill.

Are there any diagnostic tests or vaccines available?

Unfortunately, there are no current Ebola tests for dogs or other pets. There is an Ebola human vaccine in the works, but it will not be available until at least late 2016.

What symptoms should we look for?

We do not yet know if pets experience symptoms when infected with Ebola or what their specific symptoms will be. Human Ebola symptoms include fever or more than 101.5°F, severe headache, muscle pain, weakness, diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and unexplained hemorrhage (bleeding or bruising). http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/symptoms/

Interestingly, the Gabon dogs that were carrying the Ebola antibodies did NOT show symptoms – not all infected animals do. However, Dr. David Sanders, a Biology Professor at Purdue, reports that some infected animals that show no symptoms, “Can potentially be capable of transferring virus to humans.” He was referring to fruit bats, but since we do not yet definitively know if dogs, cats, or other companion animals will show symptoms when infected, be vigilant.

How long should we quarantine a pet exposed to Ebola?

This is the trickiest part of choosing to not euthanize the potentially-exposed pets of Ebola patients when their owners are diagnosed. Dr. Amesh Adalja, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Pittsburg Medical Center’s Center for Health Security posed the following quarantine questions in an interview with NPR:

“Is the incubation period the same in a dog as a human?

Does the virus follow the same type of spread inside a dog’s body?

The way we test for virus in the blood – is it the same for dogs as for humans?

What if the virus remains in the dog’s semen for three months (as it does in humans). We can tell a human to refrain from sex or practice safe sex but how do you do that with a dog?

What about the fact that saliva is a body fluid that can transmit Ebola? Dogs do a lot of licking.”

Dr. Adalja further reported that, “All our protocols and algorithms work on primates. It’s unclear to me how to translate that to canines and do it with certainty that would ensure the dog wasn’t infected or poses no risk.”
What can vet teams do right now?

Alleviate staff fears, focus on the facts, and anticipate the potential needs of patients and pet owners!

We truly hope that Ebola will prove to be non-transmittable by our furry friends, but this is a tough situation for veterinary professionals, as so much is still unknown research-wise and vet teams deal extensively with bodily fluids of animals with unknown illnesses or diseases.

The dogs involved in the Gabon study had been observed eating from the corpses of humans that had died from Ebola, so exposure would be expected in those circumstances. Currently, the CDC is not highly concerned about the potential for Ebola transmission from household pets, but it would be wise to take precautions and not automatically dismiss team or client concerns as we wait for more information to emerge.

If Ebola does show up in your area, and you discover that you worked with an animal that spent time with its owner between exposure and diagnosis, you should immediately contact the CDC whether or not the animal showed any symptoms during their appointment, hospital stay, or boarding period.

As veterinary professionals, we know to keep our mouths closed during all juicy procedures. However, how often do you cover every minor wound on your hands or arms to avoid potential contact with fluids? Or, successfully avoid having a sweet but sloppy doggy thank you kiss land on your mouth? Or, share a lick of your ice cream cone with your own dog?

This is an excellent time to review with your staff the do’s and don’t of disease containment, safe sanitation methods, and utilizing appropriate protective gear – especially when dealing with the unknown; and to share with your clientele what we do know so far about Ebola and pets!

Fulfill your regulation requirements and work to best protect your staff, clientele, and animals with Ready Vet’s easy to use emergency response plans and engaging preparedness training!

Located in the Denver Metro or surrounding areas? Contact us for a free emergency preparedness consultation!

Are You And Your Staff Prepared?

Avoid panic. Be prepared when you need it the most. Contact us today for more information!