



Cook County Urges Pet Owners to Protect Pets from Communicable Diseases

Cook County Animal and Rabies Control is advising pet owners to prepare and protect their pets from the distemper virus and the canine flu.

The department has seen an increase in cases of confirmed canine distemper virus found in raccoons tested after displaying abnormal neurologic signs.

The surveillance program for wildlife diseases in Cook County monitors rabies infection and other zoonotic diseases in wildlife and it also detects trends in diseases that can be spread to companion animals, said Dr. Donna Alexander, Administrator of the Cook County Department of Animal and Rabies Control.

“This year, 56 percent of raccoons that have been necropsied have been positive for the canine distemper virus. This exceeds the 46 percent experienced in 2004, the last year of a distemper epidemic in pet dogs in Cook County,” Alexander said. “The canine distemper virus occurs in the raccoon and coyote population to varying degrees, and we believe that the numbers we have received so far this year warrant a precautionary warning.”

The distemper virus affects the respiratory, gastrointestinal and nervous system of dogs. Symptoms can include ocular and nasal discharge, sneezing, coughing, lethargy, loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, tremors and seizures. Death can occur from secondary pneumonia or non-responsive seizure activity.

Pet owners should vaccinate their dogs and all dogs should be supervised while outside, even in a fenced-in yard, to prevent contact with wild animals, Alexander said.

Additionally, some cases of the canine influenza virus have been reported in the County. As of Feb. 2, 2016, 16 cases have been confirmed in Cook County.

Last year, an outbreak of the canine flu in the region killed at least 11 dogs.

“In January and February of 2015, we had reports from veterinarians throughout the County of an increase in canine infectious respiratory disease,” Alexander said. “The identification of the flu strain H3N2 as the culprit of the increased severity of canine respiratory disease and deaths was not made until late March and early April. We are testing and identifying H3N2 in many cases so far this year and pet owners should take action.”

Precautions recommended by the Alexander and the veterinary community include:

- Keep all pets vaccinated against core diseases and secure additional vaccines based on the animal's lifestyle. See your veterinarian as to his/her recommendations for your pet. Some vaccines are required by law.
- Social events for dogs such as dog-friendly areas, training classes, grooming and boarding should be visited with caution. Communicable diseases are transmitted through close association with other animals. Make sure that your pet is vaccinated and that the pets involved are equally protected. Minimize social activities with your pets and pets of unknown vaccination or health history.
- Visit your veterinarian at least twice per year for health reviews including recommendations on vaccines and intestinal parasite checks. Animals that are most susceptible to the viruses are those that are immune-compromised by age or other illness.