

Veterinary Health Advisory Network (VHAN)

March 18, 2020

Recommendations for Veterinary Practices

Update on COVID-19 in Houston

Currently in Harris County, 18 positive COVID-19 cases have been identified. Several of these cases do not have a known source, and therefore community spread is suspected. The number of cases is changing daily, and updated Harris County case counts can be found at [Harris County Public Health's \(HCPH\) COVID-19 website](#) and [Houston Health Department's \(HHD\) COVID-19 Updates](#).

Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo has released recommendations in order to slow the spread of COVID-19, which would allow our healthcare systems to adequately care for affected patients. Healthcare systems in other countries have been severely strained by the number of cases. General recommendations included:

1. Immediately cancelling or postponing events over 250 people
2. Cancel all gatherings in which people will be in close contact
3. Severely restrict access to senior living, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities,
4. If you're at higher risk, stay at home. This includes:
 - a. People 60 and older
 - b. People with underlying health conditions or weakened immune systems
 - c. Pregnant women
5. Employers should encourage employees to work from home, if possible

In addition, bars and nightclubs have been ordered to close, and food-service establishments have been ordered to stop in-service dining. Social distancing will be a key factor in limiting the spread of this disease.

Changes to consider for veterinary practices for patient care:

- Reaching out to clients via electronic means to keep them informed about the situation and changes that will be implemented.
- Limiting clients to one client per pet and appointments only.
- Encouraging drop-offs.
- Limiting patient care to acutely ill animals and/or emergencies, and rescheduling elective procedures.
- In the cases where there is an active veterinarian-client-patient relationship, consider the use of telemedicine to help assess the animal's condition and needs.
- If the client is sick and the animal needs to be seen in person, the ill owner should have a healthy family member or friend bring their sick animal to a veterinary hospital or clinic.
- Consider meeting clients with ill animals at their cars, rather than having them bring those animals into your waiting room.
- Mobile and house call veterinarians can consider examining animals in their vehicle, outside, or seek the assistance of a local clinic.
 - If a mobile or house call veterinarian must examine an animal in a home where someone is ill with COVID-19 and no other options are available, they should consult with local public health officials for guidance. Appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) should be considered

in all cases, and mobile and house call veterinarians should ensure they have access to handwashing and disinfection materials.

Changes to consider for veterinary practices regarding sanitation and personal protective equipment:

- Surfaces in the veterinary clinic/hospital that are touched frequently, such as workstations, keyboards, doorknobs, countertops, and stethoscopes, should be cleaned often and wiped down by employees with disposable wipes between cleanings. Provide no-touch disposal receptacles. Place hand sanitizers in multiple locations, including in exam rooms, offices, and conference rooms to encourage hand hygiene.
- [Train your staff on proper personal protective equipment \(PPE\) usage.](#)
- If clients report being sick, consider meeting clients in their car and have staff wearing appropriate PPE.
- Being strategic in the use of PPE, including masks, gowns, and gloves. With possible PPE shortages, the FDA has guidance on mask and gown conservation strategies which can be found [here](#).

Recommendations for staff:

- Veterinary healthcare team members who have symptoms of acute respiratory illness should stay at home and should not return to work until they are free of fever (fever is defined as 100.4 F or higher, using an oral thermometer), signs of a fever, and any other symptoms for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing or other symptom-altering medicine (e.g., cough suppressants).
- Communicate about COVID-19 with your team.
- Flexible sick leave policies are important and team members should be made aware of these policies.
- Team members who appear to have symptoms of acute respiratory illness upon arrival at work or who become sick during the day should be separated from other team members and sent home immediately.
- If a team member is confirmed to have COVID-19, the veterinary practice owner should inform other team members of their possible exposure to COVID-19, but maintain confidentiality as required by law.
- Team members who are exposed to another employee with confirmed COVID-19 should contact their physician or local health department to determine how best to proceed

Recommendations for the public:

- There is no evidence at this point to indicate that pets become ill with COVID-19 or that they can spread COVID-19 to people. However, since pets can transmit other diseases to people, we still recommend handwashing before and after interacting with animals.
- If you are not ill with COVID-19, you can interact with your pet as you normally would, including walking, feeding, and playing. You should continue to practice good hygiene during those interactions (e.g., wash hands before and after interacting with your pet; ensure your pet is kept well-groomed; regularly clean your pet's food and water bowls, bedding material, and toys).
- Out of an abundance of caution, it is recommended that those ill with COVID-19 limit contact with animals until more information is known about the virus. Have another member of your household take care of walking, feeding, and playing with your pet. If you have a service animal or you must care for your pet, then wear a facemask; don't share food, kiss, or hug them; and wash your hands before and after any contact with them.

Assistance needed at Harris County Pets:

At Harris County Pets (formerly known as Harris County Animal Shelter), we have been experiencing an increase in our population numbers due to steady intake and a decrease in fosters and rescues. We are in desperate need of adopters, fosters, and volunteers! We are actively encouraging all visitors to remain in their cars until they are summoned, and have implemented a foster pick-up system. For fostering, please contact foster@phs.hctx.net, and for volunteering, please contact VPHvolunteer@phs.hctx.net.

For more information

Public health entities at the local, state, and national levels have been tracking this constant developing situation. Please refer to the following sites for more information:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>)
- Harris County Public Health (<http://publichealth.harriscountytx.gov/Resources/2019-Novel-Coronavirus>)
- American Veterinary Medical Association
 - FAQs for Veterinarians and Veterinary Clinics: https://www.avma.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/covid-19-faq-vet-clinics_031620.pdf
 - General information: <https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/animal-health-and-welfare/covid-19>

If you suspect someone may be infected with coronavirus, please contact a physician and Harris County Public Health at 713-439-6000 Monday - Friday 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (713-755-5050 afterhours).

For any further questions on this developing situation, please contact Harris County Veterinary Public Health at 832-927-1106 or karen.wu@phs.hctx.net.

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