No, Your Dog Won't Give You the New Coronavirus

Plus: tips for caring for your furry friends during the health crisis.

March 18, 2020 By Liz Highleyman

Although one dog in Hong Kong has been found to have a low-level infection with the new coronavirus, it is extremely unlikely that humans will catch the virus from their dogs or cats or vice versa, health officials say.

In February, the South China Morning Post reported that a Pomeranian dog belonging to a woman hospitalized with COVID-19, as the respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus is known, tested weakly positive for the virus. Experts concluded that the dog probably caught it from its owner, making it the first known case of human-to-animal transmission.

However, the dog had only a very low level of the virus in swabs from its nose and mouth, which it might have picked up from surfaces. The dog showed no symptoms but was quarantined as a precaution.

Health officials stressed that there is no evidence that dogs or cats play a role in transmission of the new coronavirus to people.

Drawing on experience from the 2003 SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak, caused by a related coronavirus, Vanessa Barrs, PhD, a professor of companion animal health and disease at City University in Hong Kong, said, "Previous experience with SARS suggests that cats and dogs will not become sick or transmit the virus to humans."

"At that time, a small number of pets tested positive, but none became sick," she told the newspaper. "Importantly, there was no evidence of viral transmission from pet dogs or cats to humans."

While Hong Kong's Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department "strongly advises" that pets of people with the coronavirus should be quarantined, the World Organization for Animal Health stated, "Currently, there is no justification in taking measures against companion animals which may compromise their welfare."

Taking Precautions

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people who are sick with COVID-19 should “restrict contact with pets and other animals…just like you would around other people.”

While sick, avoid contact with your pet, “including petting, snuggling, being kissed or licked, and sharing food.” If possible, ask someone else in your household to care for the pet until you recover.

It is theoretically possible that a person could pick up the virus on their hands and leave it on a dog’s or cat’s coat, and it then could be transferred to the next person who pets the animal. Though unlikely, this is yet another reason to wash your hands thoroughly and often.

Mission Pet Hospital in San Francisco sent out a message to clients last week reassuring them about the low risk of transmission of the new coronavirus between humans and their pets and offering further information.

The veterinarians said dogs are susceptible to a different coronavirus, for which there is a vaccine, but this is not relevant to the new virus causing the current pandemic.

With regard to canine or feline face masks, the hospital said, “Regular face masks don’t work to prevent infection of COVID-19 in people, and they certainly won’t work with your dog (or cat).”

The hospital advises keeping at least a two- to four-week supply of pet food, cat litter and other essential pet supplies on hand in case of illness, supply disruptions or restrictions on shopping and other movement during the ongoing crisis.

Cities that have implemented “shelter in place” orders in an effort to control the coronavirus outbreak are allowing people to walk their dogs outdoors, as long as they practice social distancing and stay at least six feet away from others.

Also check out this slideshow on seven ways to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus.

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