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THE PET PLACE

New bug on the block

What you should know about canine influenza

BY VERA LAWLOR

Recent outbreaks of canine influenza in Sussex, Burlington and Mercer counties in New Jersey have local dog owners wondering if it's OK for their dogs to mix with other canines at the groomers, in the vet's waiting room or in dog parks. And, with the holiday season just a few months away, many families planning trips are worried about placing their dogs in boarding facilities.

Is there cause for concern?

The summer outbreak has not been widespread enough to warrant isolating the family dog, according to Dr. Steven Hornstein of Monroe Animal Hospital, who is president of the New Jersey Veterinary Medical Association.

"It's certainly not a disease we are seeing in very large numbers yet, but



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like any other emerging disease things could change," says Hornstein. "At the current time there is no vaccination for this although that's something that may change in the near future as well."

What is currently known about canine influenza is that it is a highly contagious respiratory infection of dogs that is caused by a virus. According to a public health announcement made by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), in partnership with leading veterinary colleges and the United State Centers for Disease Control, the virus is closely related to the virus that causes equine influenza and it is thought that the equine influenza virus mutated to produce the canine flu.

The first recognized outbreak of canine influenza in the world is believed to have occurred in racing greyhounds in January 2004 at a track in Florida. Outbreaks were later reported at 34 more tracks in 17 states. Infection has been confirmed in pet dogs in 14 states including New Jersey and New York. According to the AVMA, dogs can be infected with either a mild form of the virus, with symptoms that include a soft, moist cough, often confused with "kennel cough" and sometimes a thick nasal discharge. In the severe form, dogs develop high fevers and symptoms similar to that of pneumonia. Because this is a newly emerging disease, AVMA experts say that almost all dogs, regardless of breed or age, are susceptible to infection and have no immunity.

"In most cases, dogs that get canine flu have pretty mild infections," says Hornstein. "The fatality rate for this virus is about 1 to 5 percent, so it is on the lower end. Dogs with more significant respiratory signs are the ones you would want to have hospitalized and treat as you

would any of your typical pneumonia type cases."

Dog owners who are concerned about the virus should contact their veterinarians because animal hospitals are constantly updated by the Department of Agriculture and Department of Public Health, says Hornstein. "If there were any cases of this virus in a particular kennel or groomers it would become public knowledge because it is reportable right now."

In addition to staying informed, dog owners need to exercise the usual preventive measures when it comes to the well being of the family dog.

"It pretty much makes sense that all dogs that are being boarded or going to grooming salons should be vaccinated against kennel cough

(Bordetella), not that that vaccine will be protective against canine flu; it won't, but it covers one of the players in respiratory disease in dogs," says Bornstein.

The Monroe vet said he is often asked if the virus is the same as the avian flu. "It's not," he explains. "And it's also not contagious to people."

If there is an outbreak, says Hornstein, the canine flu is "easily killed by most disinfectants. "The virus doesn't survive very well outside the home so general practices for cleanliness, including regular disinfecting and hand washing apply here," says Hornstein.

Vera Lawlor is The Parent Paper's pet columnist. You can contact Vera at parentpaper@northjersey.com.

Dogs and Disease

Tips from the American Veterinary Medical Association in consultation with veterinary colleges and U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

- Dog owners should be aware that any situation that brings dogs together increases the risk of spreading communicable illnesses. Good infection control practices can reduce that risk. Dog owners involved in shows, sports or other activities with their dogs, or who board their dogs at kennels, should ask whether respiratory diseases have been a problem there. It's also a good idea to ask whether or not a facility has a plan for isolating dogs that develop respiratory disease; and for notifying owners if their dogs have been exposed to dogs with respiratory disease.
- As long as good infection control practices are in place, pet owners should not be overly concerned about putting dogs in training facilities, dog parks, kennels or other areas frequented by dogs.
- If your dog has a dry cough, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian so that he or she can examine and evaluate your dog and recommend an appropriate course of treatment.
- Canine influenza virus can be spread via direct contact with respiratory secretions from infected dogs and by contact with contaminated inanimate objects. Therefore, dog owners whose dogs are coughing or exhibiting other signs of respiratory disease should not participate in activities or bring their dogs to facilities where other dogs can be exposed to them.
- Clothing, equipment, surfaces and hands should be washed and disinfected after exposure to dogs showing signs of respiratory disease in order to prevent transmission of infection to susceptible dogs. Clothing can be adequately cleaned by using a detergent at normal laundry temperatures.