

Q&A: Animal health and COVID-19

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**
Capital Press

If an animal becomes ill, owners should consult a veterinarian and consider whether it could be caused by a common ailment first before worrying about coronavirus, an expert says.

Bruce Akey, director of the Texas A&M Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory in College Station, Texas, spoke with the Capital Press on April 24.

Q. USDA APHIS recently confirmed COVID-19 in two pet cats in New York. What does this mean for researchers and the public?

Akey: It means it is something to add to our list of potential diseases to rule out when we are submitted a case with a cat that's got a severe respiratory disease or (gastro-intestinal, or) GI upset. It can also cause diarrhea, apparently, in animals, as it can in humans as well.

So far, the information from researchers and cases like this one seem to indicate the real problem here is the people giving it to the cats and not the other way around. The cats seem to be somewhat innocent bystanders in this whole thing, and unfortunately it looks like they can pick it up.



Bruce Akey

The question people will have, though, is: If the cat gets it, can the cat give it either to my other cats or to other people in the house? At this point, from the little bit of research that has been done, it seems like whoever the cat got it from is a much bigger threat than the cat is, in terms of transmission of this thing. By that, I mean humans that are infected do shed enough virus to infect other humans and apparently cats as well....

Right now the guidance that has come out of both the American Veterinary Medical Association and (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) is that in general the first thing to test for in a cat with a respiratory problem is not COVID-19. The first things to test for are the usual suspects that cause respiratory disease in cats.

Both of those organizations recommend that you only test a cat for COVID-19 if there is a known contact or association with a human that's been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the household....

In most states, the policy right now is before an animal

gets tested (for COVID 19), they really want the veterinarian to have a conversation with their state veterinarian, their state animal health official, and state public health authority so they can ask questions about whether or not there's potential exposure to humans that had COVID-19 or not. (That's) because there are still precious resources that are going to be expended to test these animals.

The tests we're running in animals, we are currently using different test kits than the ones that are used in humans, so we're not competing with the human need for testing, but we still want to be careful because that supply chain is limited as well, just like it is on the human side.

Bottom line: If you've got a cat that's sneezing or another animal that you think might be ill — this has shown up in dogs in a couple places around the world as well — the first thing to do, call your vet, let the vet talk through the situation. If (they) think it's warranted, let the vet contact the state public health and state veterinarian's office and talk over the case.

And if all of those folks, with their experience and knowledge think it's still a good idea, they are welcome to contact a diagnostic lab like ours and we would be happy to

run the test.

Q. We've talked about pets and a tiger at the Bronx Zoo tested positive for COVID-19. Can you talk about possible livestock concerns?

Akey: Thus far, there is no evidence at all that any of the domestic livestock are susceptible to this virus. Nobody yet has had a case where testing has been done on the livestock and had this virus turn up in the livestock.

Viruses tend to largely focus on a species they historically have been associated with. Occasionally, though, they are able to jump into new species, which apparently has happened with COVID-19, it came out of some wildlife into humans, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's capable of jumping into every other species of animal easily.

Thus far, worldwide, I have yet to see a single report of documentation of this virus in any of the domestic livestock species — cows, pigs, horses, goats, any of them.

Q. Would those same precautions you mention for pets also apply to livestock?

Akey: So far the most susceptible species outside of humans that we know of: Cats appear to be able to get it. There have been a couple documented cases of dogs that

appear to have gotten infected but even less so than cats. Ferrets seem to be susceptible to this virus. But the livestock, no.

If you're out there on the dairy farm, beef ranch or a swine farm, if your animals have respiratory problems, again, call the vet, let's rule out the common causes and make sure you get to the bottom of this thing as quickly as possible before something else that can be more damaging to your livestock happens and starts going around and we don't know about it.

But the same cautions on social distancing: If you or any of the folks that work on the farm have got any kind of compatible respiratory symptoms themselves, they need to stay away from the animals just like they need to stay away from other humans until they get checked out.

Q. What is the biggest question right now regarding COVID-19?

Akey: Whether or not people that have had this virus are actually immune to getting it again. And if so, for how long? I think that's the really big question now.

People are starting to look towards testing for antibodies that the body normally produces to fight off a virus. Those antibodies, when produced, if

they are the type of antibodies that actually can kill off a virus or prevent that virus from getting into the body, how long do they last? For some viruses, they last for years. For other viruses, they only seem to last for a few months to maybe a year.

Q. Anything else we should include?

Akey: I would put one more caution out there. As testing gets rolled out, your readers want to be a little bit careful and ask some very pertinent questions about any tests they might themselves be getting, or their animals.

The big questions are: Has the test you're going to give me or my animal been sufficiently checked so we know it doesn't cross-react with other types of viruses out there?

A bunch of these early tests that are being rolled out for antibody testing that are commercially available — some are even being touted for home use — suffer from a lack of specificity, because they unfortunately can pick up antibodies to multiple other common human coronaviruses, many of which cause the common cold we see year in and year out.

If you don't have a test with good specificity, as well as good sensitivity, a bad test is worse than no test.

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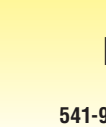
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