Colorado State University's Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory will begin testing samples from pets submitted by veterinarians for H1N1 after a small number of companion animals have tested positive for the flu. The laboratory is also offering tips to pet owners about keeping their pets healthy this flu season.

H1N1 flu cases in companion animals

A small number of companion animal H1N1 flu cases have been confirmed in one cat and two ferrets. The pets appear to have become ill after being in close contact with their owners and caretakers while sick with H1N1. At this time, there is no evidence of pets passing H1N1 to people, according to Kristy Pabilonia, a veterinarian and expert on H1N1 testing in animals at CSU.

“At this time, there are very few cases of H1N1 in pets so we don’t think that people need to be overly concerned,” said Pabilonia. “However, if someone in a household with a pet becomes ill with H1N1, they should watch their pet for symptoms and know that there is a chance that the animal could get sick.”

Limited information with new strain

Pabilonia said that because this strain of H1N1 is new, information about how it impacts animals is limited. It is possible that any animal may be susceptible to H1N1, but no other cases have been documented in companion animals. Dogs and pet birds have been susceptible to other strains of the flu.

People with the flu should be careful when in contact with their pets, practicing social distancing with pets as well as people. People are ill should wash their hands before handling pets and, if possible, have someone who is well feed and care for pets. Just like people, pets are exposed to H1N1 through aerosols -- fluids released when someone sneezes, coughs or touches their face and then a surface.

Lethargic, respiratory symptoms

Because there have only been a few cases of H1N1 flu in pets, veterinarians have limited information about the symptoms. Pets with H1N1 may behave as if they aren’t feeling well, acting lethargic and may appear to have a respiratory illness.

If a pet seems ill, it should be taken to a veterinarian for an exam as soon as possible and the veterinarian should be alerted that the pet has been exposed to someone with influenza.

Nasal or mouth swabs

CSU’s Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory is testing pets for H1N1 as part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Animal Health Laboratory Network. This network is using a test initially developed to test pigs for H1N1. It
was approved last week for testing companion animals. Tests are performed on nasal or mouth swabs. Swabs should be obtained by a veterinarian and submitted to the lab for results.

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