

Animal Health Update: Distemper outbreak in wildlife in Los Angeles County
3.10.2021

Dear Colleagues:

Throughout Los Angeles County, local animal control agencies have reported an increased amount of wildlife suspected of having distemper. From April 2020 to February 2021, these agencies reported 154 raccoons, 2 coyotes, 9 foxes, and 3 skunks with clinical signs consistent with distemper to Veterinary Public Health (VPH). Of these, there were 108 raccoons, 2 coyotes, 9 foxes, and 3 skunks reported to have possible neurologic signs. To date, 9 raccoons and 3 foxes have been necropsied or tested and confirmed to have distemper. As the neurologic symptoms of distemper are externally indistinguishable from the neurologic symptoms of rabies, public health has conducted rabies surveillance testing on many of the distemper suspects showing neurologic signs. Sixty-three raccoons, 7 foxes and 2 skunks have been tested for rabies and all found to be negative. It is very important to consider rabies as a differential diagnosis when neurologic wildlife or pets are reported in the community or presented to a veterinary or animal control facility.

To view a map of the current distemper outbreak in wildlife, please visit here:

<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/DistemperWildlife2020.htm>.

Distemper is a viral infection that can infect dogs, raccoons, skunks, foxes, and large cats such as lions and tigers. The virus does not cause disease in cats nor humans. In LA County, raccoons are the local reservoir species for distemper. Dogs can become infected with the distemper virus from direct contact with a sick animal or being near an infected animal when it is coughing or sneezing. The virus can also be transmitted through shared food and water bowls, or other objects that were contaminated by an infected animal. Puppies and unvaccinated dogs are at highest risk for infection with distemper.

Common clinical signs of distemper in dogs include discharge from the eyes and/or nose, fever, coughing, lethargy, disorientation, tremors, and seizures. The clinical signs are similar in raccoons and other wildlife. Currently there is no treatment for distemper so preventing the disease in dogs is crucial.

Los Angeles County veterinarians are advised to:

- 1) Vaccinate dogs for distemper:** Puppies should receive a series of 3 or more distemper vaccines between the ages of 2 and 4 months. The vaccine should be boosted a year later, then every three years for life.
- 2) Protect puppies:** Advise dog owners to keep puppies at home and away from unfamiliar dogs, until they have completed the vaccination series. Use caution when socializing dogs or in areas where dogs congregate, such as dog parks, doggy day care, and boarding facilities.
- 3) Keep dogs away from wildlife:** Advise dog owners to never allow their dogs to have contact with wildlife.

- 4) **Keep pet food and water indoors, away from wildlife:** Advise dog owners that pet food and water left outdoors attracts wildlife, which can spread distemper to their dog.
- 5) **Report all cases of distemper in Los Angeles County:** Cases may be reported using the form available at:
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/docs/Forms/VaccPrevDisReportForm.pdf>
- 6) **Animal control agencies should continue to report distemper suspects and/or neurologic wildlife in Los Angeles County:** Cases may be reported using the form available at:
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/docs/Forms/AnimalDiseaseReportForm.pdf>

For more information about distemper and to view a history of distemper outbreaks in animals Los Angeles County, please visit here: <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/distemper.htm>.

For public health consultations or to report a disease call and ask to speak with the Veterinarian-On-Call at 213-288-7060 (M-F 8am-5pm), or email us at vet@ph.lacounty.gov.

Sincerely,

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