

Pets and the Flu

What is the Flu?

Influenza, or flu, is primarily a respiratory disease caused by the influenza virus. There are three types of influenza virus – influenza A, influenza B and influenza C. Humans are susceptible to all three types, with influenza A causing most cases of human flu.

Can animals get the flu?

Influenza B and C only infect humans. Some types of influenza A virus can infect animals, especially birds. In general, most types of influenza A viruses can cause disease in only one type of animal but occasionally can cross over to infect and cause illness in another animal species.

Birds, especially water birds such as ducks and geese, are the natural reservoir of influenza A viruses in nature. Influenza A infections in birds are often called “bird flu” or “avian influenza.” Most wild birds do not become ill when infected with influenza A. They can pass it to domestic poultry such as chickens and turkeys and to pet birds that can become severely ill and die. With rare exceptions, avian strains of influenza A do not infect other types of animals or people.

For the past several years, however, a dangerous strain of avian influenza A has been spreading in wild birds and poultry throughout parts of Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa. This particular strain, known as H5N1, has caused some human infections and deaths and has infected several types of animals including domestic and wild cats. But this strain has not shown the ability to go from person to person effectively.

Horses and other equines are susceptible to infection with some types of influenza A. These infections in horses are often referred to as “equine flu.” Younger animals are the most susceptible to the disease, and some may require veterinary care. Vaccines are available for horses and other equines through veterinarians.

Recently, a strain of equine flu has been able to infect dogs. This strain of flu has been seen only in a few states and has been almost exclusively associated with dog race tracks and animal shelters where large numbers of animals are housed together in close contact. Symptoms range from a mild respiratory illness to severe disease that may result in death. At this time, no vaccine is available for dogs.

In general, cats are not susceptible to influenza infection, with the exception of the H5N1 avian influenza.

Pigs are highly susceptible to some types of influenza A and may become infected with some human and avian strains in addition to strains that circulate mainly in pigs. There are vaccines available for pigs through veterinarians.

Influenza A viruses also have been isolated from a variety of wild mammals, particularly marine mammals such as seals and whales.

How is flu treated in animals?

Treatment of animals with influenza consists generally of supportive care by a veterinarian.



What you need to know about...



Except for domestic birds, the disease usually will run its course in a week or two, although some animals might become very ill and die. Antiviral drugs generally are not used for treating influenza infections in animals. With the exception of horses, pigs and birds, no vaccines are available commercially for animals.

DO NOT GIVE YOUR MEDICATIONS TO PETS OR FARM ANIMALS.

What should be done with animals that die of the flu?

Your veterinarian can tell you about safe disposal of animals that die from flu infection. In most cases, no special burial is required. However, if you suspect influenza infection in domestic poultry, do not move the birds anywhere, even to a veterinarian. Do not attempt to dispose of dead birds yourself. Contact the Texas Animal Health Commission immediately for assistance.