

Swine flu toll includes a few pets

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This Dec. 1, 2009 file photo shows pet dogs wearing masks after local media reported that two dogs were infected with H1N1 flu virus in Beijing. (AP Photo)

(AP) -- A handful of pets have been sickened with swine flu in recent weeks, but here are doctors' orders: Wash your hands and don't panic.

The virus, also known as H1N1, has been diagnosed in only a few cats and ferrets since it emerged in April. Veterinarians say they don't know if that is because so few animals have been tested or because so few have the disease.

"I think we're probably going to be seeing more (pet) cases in the future. There is more focus on it so people are looking harder," said Dr. Kristy Pabilonia of the Colorado State University Department of [Veterinary Medicine](#), which confirmed two new cases in cats on Friday.

A lethargic 13-year-old tabby in Iowa that was having trouble breathing was the first house cat to be diagnosed. In the last two months, other cats have tested positive in Iowa, Utah and Pennsylvania. All have recovered or are expected to recover, Pabilonia said.

Swine flu appears to be the latest disease spread between animals and humans, said Dr. Miranda Spindel, Director of Veterinary Outreach for the ASPCA and based in Fort Collins, Colo. Other examples include ringworm, salmonella, plague and rabies.

"There are lots of diseases that are transmitted from people to pets and vice versa and people tend to forget that," Spindel said.

However, it is rare for flu viruses to jump between species, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association. And there is no evidence that humans can get the swine flu infection from pets.

Still, the few confirmed pet cases have people keeping a closer eye on their animals, Spindel said. "There are a lot of questions coming in. People are anticipating, worried about ways they can limit transmission or prevent exposure," she said.

Whether doctors are treating humans or pets, they give the same advice: Wash your hands, cover your mouth when you sneeze and limit contact with others if you are ill.

Symptoms in pets may include lethargy, decreased appetite, fever, runny nose and eyes, sneezing, coughing and changes in breathing patterns. Because there have been only a few cases, Pabilonia said vets have limited information about the severity of the disease in house pets.

Patrice deAvila of Portland, Ore., worries her four rescue cats are more vulnerable to the swine flu than she is, because of both her job and her

age, which she calls middle.

"I am very careful when I come home. I take my shoes off. I wash my hands very diligently. I try not to expose them because of the potential exposure I have," said deAvila, a patient advocate at a Portland hospital. "We are aware of the swine flu and we watch them closely."

No cases have been reported in dogs or birds, but at least five ferrets in Nebraska and Oregon tested positive, and one died. There have been a few cases in other animals - including turkeys and pigs - that appear to have gotten the illness from farm workers. A cheetah from a zoo in California also tested positive, but it is unknown whether it had contact with a handler or zoo visitor with swine flu.

[Swine flu](#) is waning in humans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which reported Friday that infections are now widespread in only 25 states, down from 48 in late October.

But pet owners should keep pets up to date on vaccinations for other diseases, make sure they are eating well, keep bowls and living spaces clean and take sick animals to the vet.

Don't panic, Spindel said. "At this time, cats appear to be dead end hosts - unable to perpetuate spread of the virus - and to date, no dogs in the United States have tested positive for the virus."

And one last warning from Dr. Michael Greger, a Washington-based physician and director of public health and animal agriculture for the Humane Society of the United States: Don't share human medicine with your pets. Flu drugs are dose specific and one size does not fit all, so the cure could be as dangerous to your pet as the disease, he said.

On the Net:

<http://www.asPCA.org>

<http://www.humanesociety.org>

<http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu>

<http://www.news.colostate.edu/Release/4934>

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