Leptospirosis: An Increasing Health Risk

Leptospirosis is a severe zoonotic bacterial infection that is staging a comeback according to an expert at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine. Dr. Richard E. Goldstein has reported there is an increase in positive tests on small-breed dogs due to skipped vaccinations and the overlap of surbanan development and wildlife. A zoonotic disease is one which affects both pets and people.

The Center for Disease Control defines leptospirosis as a disease caused by a spiral shaped bacteria called leptospires. The disease can be serious for both humans and animals. In people, the symptoms are often like the flu, but sometimes leptospirosis can develop into a more severe, life-threatening illness with infections in the kidney, liver, brain, lung, and heart.

The bacteria are spread through the urine of infected animals, which can get into water or soil and can survive there for weeks to months. Humans and animals can become infected through contact with this contaminated urine (or other body fluids, except saliva), water, or soil. The bacteria can enter the body through skin or mucous membranes (eyes, nose, or mouth), especially if the skin is broken from a cut or scratch. Drinking contaminated water can also cause infection.

The clinical signs of leptospirosis vary and are nonspecific. Sometimes pets do not have any symptoms. Common clinical signs reported in dogs include fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, refusal to eat, severe weakness and depression, stiffness, severe muscle pain, or inability to have puppies. Generally younger animals are more seriously affected than older animals.

If you suspect your pet has this disease, contact your veterinarian immediately. Your veterinarian can perform tests to detect the presence of leptospiral antibodies or organisms.

Leptospirosis is treatable with antibiotics. If an animal is treated early, it may recover more rapidly and any organ damage may be less severe. Other treatment methods, such as dialysis and hydration therapy may be required. The time between exposure to the bacteria and development of disease is usually 5 to 14 days, but can be as short as a few days or as long as 30 days or more.

If your pet has been confirmed by your veterinarian as having leptospirosis, the appropriate action to take will depend on the nature of contact with your pet. Normal daily activities with your pet will not put you at high risk for leptospirosis infection. Types of contacts that are considered to be high risk include direct or indirect contact with urine, blood, and tissues of your pet during its infection. Assisting in the delivery of newborns from an infected animal is also considered a high-risk activity for transmission of leptospirosis. If you have had these types of high-risk contacts with your pet during the time of its infection, inform your physician. If common symptoms, such as fever, muscle aches, and headaches, occur

within 3 weeks after a high-risk exposure, see your physician. Tests can be performed to see if you have this disease.

Taking preventative measures can minimize the risks of this disease. I recommend an annual leptospirosis vaccination and attention to pest control. Mice and rats can spread the disease. The vaccine has been improved over the years as there are several strains of the leptospira bacteria that are now included. If you suspect any signs or symptoms of the disease contact your veterinarian for an exam and possible testing. Include the leptospira vaccine in your pets annual exam if there is any potential for exposure.