

Swine Flu (H1N1 Virus) In Cats

In my last column I described a flu like syndrome in dogs. Up to that point, no dog or cat had been diagnosed with swine flu. That has changed since that article was published as a cat has been diagnosed with H1N1 virus in Iowa.

The American Veterinary Medical Association stated that the cat in Iowa tested positive “marking the first time a cat has been diagnosed with this strain of influenza”. The statement added, “The cat, which has recovered, is believed to have caught the virus from someone in the household who was sick with H1N1. There are no indications that the cat passed the virus on to any other animals or people”.

The virus has been found in humans, pigs, birds and ferrets prior to this discovery. I recently have seen a cat with similar signs to the cat in Iowa. That pet was is a 16 pound orange tabby cat. He was described as not obese and the symptoms he displayed were also typical of many other medical problems. He stopped eating and drinking and did not groom himself. He demonstrated signs of respiratory distress by hunching on all four feet rather than lying on his side. Several days earlier, two family members had developed flu like symptoms with fever and body aches. When first presented, both the owner and the veterinarian wondered if the cat had a gastrointestinal problem because he had vomited.

Treatment is mostly supportive. Giving fluids to prevent dehydration and antibiotics to prevent bacterial infection are basic treatment options. Sometimes additional tests and x-rays are required to rule out pneumonia or gastrointestinal foreign bodies. In this case, the cat and family members are recovering well. It is most likely that the cat contracted the virus from the owners as he never goes outdoors.

Now that this has been reported in the media, there will be a vigilant lookout for this virus in cats that are in households that are struck by the H1N1v virus. The following recommendations may help prevent your cat from becoming infected and help you determine which paths to take if you suspect H1N1 is affecting your family and pets:

1. Isolation from sick family members is recommended.

2. Be on the lookout for symptoms like vomiting, anorexia, poor grooming or lethargy.
3. Be aware that many diseases can cause these symptoms and do not panic.
4. Keep other family members isolated from a cat that has these symptoms.
5. Consult with your veterinarian. He will record the recent history and can perform basic tests that can rule out other problems.

There is still much information to be collected. This is only case so far that has been reported, although this may be the first feline actually tested for the virus. Your best source for up to date information is your veterinarian as the internet can be misleading in situations like this. Early detection and simple supportive care will most likely be all that is needed.