



Second Oregon cat dies after catching swine flu from its owner

By Lynne Terry, The Oregonian

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Various diseases in animals have long been a threat to humans. Take rabies, for example, or West Nile virus. Animals carrying salmonella and E. coli also can infect humans.

But with swine flu, veterinarians are seeing a relatively rare phenomenon: The transmission is going the other way.

And in Oregon, that has proved fatal.

Emilio DeBess, public health veterinarian, announced that a cat died on the Oregon coast after catching the H1N1 virus from its owner.

This is the second death of a cat from swine flu in Oregon, and the second nationwide.

"It's interesting that it's being passed from humans to animals," DeBess said. "We've had two cats, and both of them have died. Are cats more sensitive to H1N1? That's the question that has to be looked into."

DeBess is working with researchers at the Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory at Oregon State University in hopes of unveiling clues about why cats might be susceptible to the virus.

The lab, which has run H1N1 tests on nasal swabs from potentially infected pets, will be studying the lung tissue from the two Oregon cats.

In the first case, a cat died Nov. 7 in Lebanon. It got sick about a week after a child in the household came down with swine flu. The second cat, which caught the H1N1 virus from its owner on the coast, died Nov. 24.

That cat, an 8-year-old spayed female, had a history of allergies and chronic sinusitis, possibly making it more susceptible to the virus.

Pet cats in Pennsylvania, Utah, Colorado, Iowa and France have also developed swine flu from their owners, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Just as in human transmission of the flu virus, people pass H1N1 to cats through close contact. At least four pet ferrets in Oregon came down with the virus after people in their households became sick, and one ferret in Nebraska died.

So far, no dogs in the U.S. have been diagnosed with swine flu. Chinese authorities have reported two canine cases in Beijing, but the AVMA has not been able to confirm them.

"It may be that dogs are more resistant to the virus," said Kim May, a veterinarian with the AVMA.

The organization has confirmed cases of farm animals catching swine flu. Pigs in herds around the globe -- from Ireland to Indonesia to Argentina to the U.S. -- have become infected along with turkeys in Chile, Canada and the U.S. Even a cheetah living on a wildlife preserve in Northern California tested positive for H1N1. Scientists are not sure how the cheetah became infected.

While the AVMA continues to document cases, little is known about transmission of the virus from humans to animals.

DeBess said that more is known about human-to-animal transmission of MRSA, or methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, which is a staph infection often associated with hospitals.

Kim May, a veterinarian with the AVMA, said that a number of dogs and cats have gotten MRSA from their owners in the past decade.

MRSA can be transmitted through skin contact -- but H1N1 is a respiratory ailment.

"If a person has some sort of bacteria on their skin, they could pass it on," May said. "But viruses are less likely to do that. They usually adapt to one species and stick to it."

There is one other virus known to have spread among species -- so-called avian flu. Both people and birds have come down with H5N1, as have pet cats.

But there have been no cases in the U.S., which has yet to see an H5N1 infection in any species.

As for H1N1, the virus appears to be waning in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But DeBess still advises pet owners to wash their hands frequently, especially if they are sick.

If a pet comes down with flulike symptoms, take it to a veterinarian. And don't panic. So far, relatively few cats and ferrets have gotten sick.

It's not clear why Oregon has seen the only feline deaths, but it may be related to an extensive reporting network set up by DeBess.

No cases of animal-to-human transmission of the H1N1 virus have been recorded either.

"There's been no sign of cats or animals passing it back to people," said Michael San Filippo, spokesman for the AVMA. "It seems like this is all coming from humans to animals, not the other way around. We can't say it's impossible, but we've not seen it yet."

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