

COVID-19: Recommendations for handling susceptible pet animals

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Background

COVID-19 is a respiratory disease transmitted by droplets from human to human which is currently spreading worldwide. Recent studies from the People's Republic of China have shown that antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 could be detected in cats in the epidemic area. Further studies have shown that cats can be infected experimentally, excrete the virus and infect other cats. In addition, a domestic cat from a COVID-19 affected household in Belgium, a tiger in the USA and several cats from infected individuals have been tested positive for SARS-CoV-2. Furthermore, experimental studies conducted in China and at the Friedrich-Loeffler-Institut, among others, showed that ferrets can be infected with SARS-CoV-2. Dogs, on the other hand, seem to be less susceptible to infection according to the above-mentioned study from China. The answers to frequently asked questions (FAQ) about SARS-CoV-2/Covid-19 provide information on how to handle dogs (<https://www.fli.de/de/aktuelles/tierseuchengeschehen/coronavirus/>).

Since SARS-CoV-2 infections are widespread in the human population, there is a possibility that susceptible pets may also become infected through close contact with infected humans. These infections can occur in healthy cats and ferrets with little or no symptoms.

Experience to date, including from Germany, provides no evidence that pets, including cats and ferrets, transmit SARS-CoV-2 to humans. This could be because these animals do not excrete the virus in such quantities or in such a way that they become a source of infection for humans. However, the studies mentioned above show that they could be a source of infection.

Keeping pets in case of confirmed COVID-19 disease/SARS-CoV-2 infection

Persons suffering from COVID-19 or infected with SARS-CoV-2 should avoid close contact with pets, especially cats and ferrets. Pets that live in the same household as a person found to be infected with SARS-CoV-2 and are therefore likely to have been exposed to the virus should remain in the household during self-isolation of the infected person. If possible, another non-infected/non-diseased member of the household should care for the animal. If possible, it should be avoided that by giving the animal away, the virus is spread to other households or, for example, animal shelters. If pet care by relatives, friends, or neighbours is not possible, a solution taking into account the well-being of the animal should be found in consultation with the veterinary office.

During self-isolation, any contact, especially of cats exposed to the virus, with persons outside the household or with other cats outdoors should be avoided.

If pet owners infected with SARS-CoV-2 request laboratory testing of their own susceptible pet animals, sampling and testing should be notified to the competent veterinary office. Sampling should be carried out on site by a qualified and appropriately protected individual.

If other animal owners wish to have an animal tested for SARS-CoV-2, this should only be done after consultation with the veterinarian. If the animal is to be tested, swab samples from the pharyngeal or nasal mucosa or, if other samples cannot be collected, fecal samples may be used and tested by RT-PCR.

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However, the Friedrich-Loeffler-Institut does not support testing of animals without an epidemiological relationship with SARS-CoV-2 infection/COVID-19.

Procedure in case of positive tested pet animals

Some veterinary laboratories offer testing of samples from animals for SARS-CoV-2. Detection of the virus in susceptible pets such as cats and ferrets is to be expected. Although experimental data are lacking, there is no evidence of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 from susceptible pets to humans. In accordance with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the risk of transmission from susceptible pets to humans is considered low. When deciding to test animals, it should be borne in mind that the prevention of infection and testing of human samples have priority.

If an animal tested positive does not already live in a household with persons in self-isolation or quarantine or if the animal owner has had to be hospitalized, the animal should be kept in isolation for 14 days (similar to the procedure for humans), if possible. Persons with close contact to the animal are Category II contact persons. More information on contact person management can be found on the website of the Robert Koch Institute:

https://www.rki.de/DE/Content/InfAZ/N/Neuartiges_Coronavirus/Kontaktperson/Management.html.

General recommendations for the population

When keeping pets, basic hygiene measures should always be observed. This includes washing hands before and after handling animals, avoiding kissing, licking, sharing food and prolonged close contact (e.g. sleeping in the same bed). In the current COVID-19 situation, this should be considered in particular by persons with a higher risk of a severe course of disease.

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