

Veterinarians warn of canine flu

By Diana M. Alba Sun-News reporter

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LAS CRUCES An influenza that sickens dogs hasn't been found in the Las Cruces area yet, but some local veterinarians are advising that it has shown up in the state.

The virus, called Canine Influenza virus, was confirmed in two dogs in Albuquerque in recent weeks, said Las Cruces veterinarian Scott Pirtle, of the Animal Hospital of Las Cruces.

"We do have it in New Mexico, and any time you have a new disease like that, you do tend to get a certain amount of public panic," he said. "The vets in Las Cruces we'd just like to alleviate anyone having a panic about it, but at the same time, we'd be remiss if we didn't educate the public about it."

The risk of the virus is that it is a new strain, meaning dogs won't have immunity, and it can cause outbreaks. In all, about 80 percent of dogs exposed will become ill, though just 1 to 5 percent will die as a result, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

According to the organization's Web site, the virus causes upper respiratory infections. Symptoms can include a cough, runny nose and fever. It's transmitted by particles in the air or contaminated objects.

Dogs considered at higher risk for catching the illness are those in boarding kennels, dog parks and the animal shelter, where canines co-mingle with unfamiliar animals in greater numbers.

"What got me alarmed about Canine Influenza is that I had a former employee who was fostering a dog from the animal shelter," he said. "She has six adult dogs, all well-vaccinated because she has worked here in a vet clinic. She took the puppy back to the shelter to be neutered, and, within in a week or two, three of her adult dogs became extremely sick with pneumonia, a very high fever, and one of them almost died."

Pirtle said the dogs ended up testing negative for Canine Influenza, but the incident put him on alert. He noted that the first vaccine against the virus was released on a conditional license earlier this year. He said pet owners should ask their veterinarian about it.

"If your animal is in what we'd consider a high-risk group, it might be something you'd want to consider," he said.

The vaccine, a two-shot series, will cost around \$25, Pirtle said.

Frank Bryce, owner of the Doggie Dude Ranch, a Las Cruces boarding facility, said Friday he's not concerned about the virus yet because it hasn't turned up locally.

Pirtle said neither other animal species or people can catch the virus. Also, it's not related to the swine flu or any other strain of human flu.

Part of the problem in diagnosing the illness and hence finding out whether it's in Las Cruces is that it resembles other illnesses such as kennel cough, a syndrome that stems from a spectrum of other viruses. Pirtle said that means testing must be done to confirm the virus, and, at a cost of about \$120, most pet owners don't opt to pay for it, especially because the knowledge doesn't change the type of treatment the dog gets.

"It's just not easy for us to look at the dog and tell what infections they may have, and in fact, they may have multiple infections at the same time," he said.

Still, Pirtle said, the company manufacturing the vaccine, Intervet/Schering Plough Animal Health Corp., is "selectively" offering free testing, some of which he's carrying out at his clinic.

Beth Vesco-Mock, director of the Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley, acknowledged that dogs at the shelter are at higher risk for the virus. Even so, she said, she it's not high on her priority list because other illnesses are more pressing.

For instance, Vesco-Mock said, canine distemper, a viral disease that's often fatal, is prevalent in the community. She pointed out that the disease can be prevented with an initial vaccination and an annual booster.

"It's very devastating," she said. "You should be vaccinating your puppies, and I wouldn't be killing all these dogs."

Vesco-Mock said she plans to do carry out some testing for Canine Influenza in January.

Said Pirtle: "Whether flu is present here or not, we really can't say right now. What we'd encourage on an individual, case-by-case basis is that some of our dogs may warrant vaccination."

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