

Healthy pets, healthy people

Animal checkups can help prevent spread of illness



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When patients are diagnosed with infectious diseases, it's common for doctors to ask questions about their lifestyles and recent travel to help identify points of potential exposure. Included in the investigation is an inquiry into whether the patient is a pet owner.

“Even as part of a routine history, you want to ask about pets, because they are implicated in a lot of the diseases we think about,” said Dr. Vidya Sundareshan, assistant professor of infectious diseases at SIU School of Medicine.

Zoonotic diseases are those that can be transmitted from animals to humans. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 60 percent of all human pathogens are zoonotic. While exposure to wild animals is much more dangerous than contact with domesticated pets, people still need to be aware what diseases their cat or dog might pass along.

Sundareshan said that people whose immune systems are compromised are at a greater risk for contracting a zoonotic infection from a pet. This includes children under the age of 5, the elderly, people with HIV, and patients who have recently undergone an organ transplant. Pregnant women also are included on this list.

According to the CDC's Healthy Pets Healthy People website (www.cdc.gov/healthypets), pregnant women who own cats can be exposed to toxoplasmosis, an infection caused by a parasite carried by cats that can lead to complications with pregnancy. The center recommends that a non-pregnant person empty litter boxes daily, the cat be kept indoors and stray cats avoided.

From pet to human

Diseases such as Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever can be contracted from pets infested with ticks. Although Illinois isn't one of the states where these diseases are prevalent, Sundareshan did say that there have been a couple of area cases of Rocky Mountain spotted fever that were traced back to a pet.

Other zoonotic illnesses include rabies, cat scratch disease, salmonella, tapeworm and ringworm. Intestinal parasites common in animals can be particularly dangerous when introduced into a human.

"Each parasite has its own specific host and if those parasites get into our bodies, they literally don't know where to go. And so what happens is, for example, instead of staying in the digestive tract, maybe they migrate to our brain, or our eye. It's called visceral larva migrans, and it's just a parasite in an abnormal host that doesn't know where to go and causes tremendous damage," said Dr. Gary Minder of Grace Veterinary Clinic in Chatham.

Minder said that many diseases that people might pick up from their pet are through contact with an animal's fecal matter.

"Somehow, we have to ingest some portion of the animal's stool to get the infection. And it can be microscopic. Just touching them or petting them and there's some feces on the animal's coat and then you put your fingers in your mouth or chew on your nails, you can contract it that way," he said.

Prevention the key

Contracting diseases from pets can be prevented through regular preventative measures.

Kissing a pet on the mouth or allowing it to lick a person's face is not recommended. People should also wash their hands after petting or playing with an animal. As with humans, maintaining good nutrition for pets is important, not only to strengthen their immune systems, but also to diminish the likelihood that they will forage for spoiled or uncooked food, which could contain parasites. While it's good to let a pet run outdoors, contact with wildlife and exposure to mosquitoes and ticks are among the most common ways that a pet can contract a zoonotic disease.

"In an ideal world, cats should be kept indoors, but if they can't they should be seen at least twice a year. Use good flea preventatives and tick preventatives," Minder said. "Every three to six months, scour the litter box using a 10 percent bleach solution and wear gloves. And keep the stool picked up in the yard."

Both Minder and Sundareshan stressed that the likelihood of contracting a zoonotic illness from a pet is not great, provided the animal is well cared for.

"I don't want people to come away and think, 'Wow, our pets are dirty and they're infected,' because the joy and the fulfillment we get from having pets far out weigh the potential risks," Minder said. "But with pet ownership comes the responsibility to seek veterinarian care. And the bottom line is that if (pet owners) are not sure about something, they should contact their veterinarian."

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