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MICHIGAN

State officials identify cause of Michigan dog illness



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State agricultural officials on Wednesday announced they have identified canine parvovirus as the illness recently spreading to dogs mostly in northern Michigan and causing some deaths.

Testing results centered on samples from cases sent by the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to Michigan State University's veterinary lab in Lansing.

The affected dogs did not have a history of complete vaccination, officials said Wednesday.

Jennifer Holton, communications director for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, said in a statement: "Parvovirus is not a reportable disease to the state veterinarian, so there isn't a direct case count number to provide. What we have is anecdotal information placing the parvo case number somewhere between 15-25 or so, but no confirmation."

Officials urged residents to ensure their dogs are vaccinated.

"Canine parvovirus is a severe and highly contagious disease in dogs, and veterinary professionals have extensive experience with this virus," said State Veterinarian Nora Wineland. "We have a highly effective vaccine available to help protect dogs from the virus. Dogs that are not fully vaccinated against this virus are the most at risk. ... Protecting Michigan's dogs is a team effort."

Canine parvovirus is not contagious to people or other species of domestic animals.

Kim Dodd, director of the MSU Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, added: "This situation is complex because although the dogs displayed clinical signs suggestive of parvovirus, they consistently test negative by point-of-care tests performed in clinics and shelters. Screening

tests for parvo are done to help guide immediate isolation, disinfection and treatment protocols. While those tests are valuable in the clinical setting, they are not as sensitive as the diagnostic tests we can perform here in the laboratory. We continue to further characterize the virus in hopes of better understanding why those animals were testing negative on screening tests.”

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development also is encouraging all dog owners to take steps including:

- Keeping dogs and puppies at home and away from other dogs if they are exhibiting any signs of illness and contact your veterinarian if there are signs
- Cleaning up after your pet when you’re walking them in public

Veterinarians are encouraged to pursue additional diagnostics at the MSU lab when screening tests for canine parvovirus are negative but clinical presentation is consistent with parvovirus infection. Residents can call MSU diagnostic lab at (517) 353-1683 with questions about sample collection, submission or diagnostic options and contact the state Department of Agriculture and Rural Development at 1 (800) 292-3939 if unusual or reportable illnesses are seen.

“The discovery of these cases should not cause dog owners to drastically change how they care for their pets or where they plan to travel,” state officials said Wednesday. “If dogs are fully vaccinated against canine parvovirus, they are protected against severe illness, but it is important to always consult with your veterinarian.”

The cases sparking concern and testing were reported in Otsego and Clare counties.

Before the state identified them as parvovirus-related, some Metro Detroit animal rescue groups were preparing for potential rises in the region, warning volunteers to limit interactions or extend quarantine times for rescue dogs.

Juniper Fleming, executive director at Rebel Dogs Detroit, a foster-based shelter launched in 2018, notes the city often sees parvo cases in warmer months.

Fleming's group recently tended to a pair stricken with the illness after living outdoors. One died within 48 hours.

She said dog owners often are warned that their pets don't necessarily have to touch or interact with an infected canine to become infected. “It’s transmittable in a way that people aren’t thinking that it is.”

For now, her group is watching out for alerts from the state, heeding officials' advice and following guidelines, including a quarantine period.

"When you're working with the high volume we're working with, you try to look out for symptoms and tell fosters not to walk unvaccinated dogs in locations where they're not familiar with the dogs who have been in that location," Fleming said.

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