

New Protection against an Old Disease.....

Lurking in Your Yard!

Leptospirosis is a disease that has been around for decades, but in recent years, it is showing up more often in pets in the Southeast, including here in Sarasota and Manatee counties. The disease affects people, as well as our pets and wildlife. It is the world's most common "zoonotic" disease, which means that it can be transmitted from animals to people. It is spread by bacteria in the urine of infected animals and can survive for months in wet soil and bodies of water, such as streams, lakes, rivers, and even puddles of rainwater in your neighborhood.

For both pets and humans, the disease initially causes vague symptoms, including fever, lethargy, vomiting and flu-like malaise. However, it can progress to liver disease, kidney failure, miscarriage and even death. Often the kidneys already are involved before the patient realizes he or she is truly sick. Pets are at risk even in their own yards as Lepto-as it is commonly called-can be carried by almost all mammals, including squirrels, mice, rats, horses, skunks, opossums, raccoons, and deer. Only cats seem to be resistant to this disease. If there are animals in your neighborhood that walk through your yard and even in areas adjacent to your yard, then rainwater carrying their urine can flow into your backyard and lead to contaminated puddles or other bodies of water.

A few years ago, there was an outbreak in Tampa involving more than 30 people. All of the individuals that

became ill had participated in a triathlon a short time before the outbreak. Investigators from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) determined that the legs of the athletes had been scratched by as they ran alongside on the highway. When they dove into Tampa Bay for the swimming segment of the event, the Lepto penetrated their bodies through cuts on their legs. The CDC concluded that Tampa Bay was contaminated by Lepto from rainwater runoff that contained animal urine.

Dogs can ingest the bacteria by licking their feet after swimming, drinking or even walking through contaminated water. Dogs also spend a lot of time sniffing and investigating their territories, and their curious noses may lead them to come in contact with infected urine. The disease can be treated by a veterinarian, but, in some cases, it already has caused grave problems before the pet is taken to the veterinarian.

Preventing the disease with a vaccine is preferable to treating the disease after a pet becomes infected. There has been a vaccine to protect pets against Lepto for many years, but a high percentage of veterinarians quit administering the vaccine almost twenty years ago, because the disease was seldom seen, and the vaccine was known to cause adverse reactions in animals. The decrease in usage of the vaccine is a major factor in the current increase in the incidence of Lepto cases. The good news is that there is a new vaccine available that uses recombinant DNA technology, which, in turn, eliminates nasty adverse or allergic reactions. This technology also prevents the shedding of the virus by pets, which was a big problem with prior vaccines. It also is the first Lepto vaccine that the FDA has approved that claims it actually prevents the disease as opposed to merely “aiding in the

prevention of the disease,” as prior vaccines did. Even more importantly, this vaccine protects against the four most prevalent strains of Lepto, including the one that most often affects humans. In closing, let me urge dog owners to vaccinate their canine family members against Leptospirosis and to be vigilant in preventing your dogs from drinking, swimming or wading in water that might be contaminated with animal urine.