PREVENTING INFECTIOUS DISEASES

As the weather turns warm, not only do we enjoy the great outdoors more, but so do our pets, and for veterinarians, your patients. However, there are hidden risks when pets venture outside…even if it’s only in the back yard. It’s important for veterinarians to help educate pet owners on the lurking dangers and the precautions to take in order to minimize risks. UC Davis veterinarians offer helpful tips on protecting pets against infectious diseases.

Infections from fleas, mosquitoes and ticks:
Pets that go outdoors are susceptible to infections transmitted by fleas, mosquitoes and ticks. UC Davis entomologists believe the California drought is contributing to an increase in these infestations this year, especially fleas. They also report never-before-seen levels of urban wildlife populations – raccoons, opossums and rats that all carry fleas. The lack of rain and warm temperatures have allowed the fleas to not just survive, but thrive this past winter.

Dr. Julie Meadows, a clinical professor in the Community Practice Service at the UC Davis Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital, explains that treating fleas with “old-school” products like foggers that kill larvae and eggs in your house is ineffective. She says topical, oral and flea collar products are more effective.

“So as a dog or cat walks through an infested house, or an infested yard, the flea jump on and either die, or we use products that prevent them from reproducing,” said Dr. Meadows.

Mosquitos also pose a big problem for pets, as they are the cause of heartworm disease. Since there are mosquitoes living year round in many locations, the use of heartworm preventatives is an effective way to protect against this disease.

In California, dogs are more likely to develop tick-borne diseases than cats. A variety of products is available to protect against ticks. The products may not be effective, though, if pet owners do not follow the manufacturer’s instructions. Dr. Jane Sykes, an infectious disease specialist and director of the VMTH’s Small Animal Clinic warns that cats are susceptible to toxicity from many tick products (permethrin and amitraz), so sometimes cats can get sick if they live with a dog using these products.

“If you have cats, make sure you use a product that is safe for cats, such as flumethrin or fipronil,” said Sykes.

Feline infectious diseases:
Cats who spend time outdoors are at risk for a number of infectious diseases. The most common one is an abscess that occurs from an injury received during a fight with another cat. Cats who fight are also at risk for acquiring two viral infections—feline leukemia virus and feline immunodeficiency virus, which harm the immune system. Feline viral upper respiratory disease and feline panleukopenia virus are also transmitted between cats.

Other infectious diseases:

**Kennel cough** – respiratory illness contracted when cats or dogs are housed in close quarters

**Salmonellosis and rare infectious diseases, like plague or tularemia** – cats and dogs can contract when they eat lizards, rabbits, raw fish or rodents

**Pythiosis** – uncommon but serious disease which is found in water sources in some areas of California. This fungus-like organism infects the gastrointestinal tract and causes bloody diarrhea and weight loss in dogs.