

COVID-19 guidelines for pets and other animals

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Coronavirus (COVID-19): advice for people with animals

1. Can my animal infect me with Covid-19?

There is currently no evidence that pet or farm animals can transmit Covid-19 to humans (AVMA, BVA, CDC, ECDC, WSAVA). There is therefore no justification in taking measures against them (OIE), and they should not be abandoned.

The bond that people share with their pets is very important and can provide much needed support, comfort and companionship to people in these difficult times.

We encourage owners to follow standard hygiene practices when handling their companion animals. This includes washing hands properly before and after handling one's own pets, their food, or any of their supplies (BVA, WHO) and avoid being kissed or licked by their pets. Avoid petting pets of other owners and always wash one's hand after taking a dog for a walk outside and wash pets' paws with soap and water when re-entering the house.

2. Can animal products infect me with Covid-19?

As per general good food safety practices, raw meat should be handled with care, to avoid the transfer of any potential cross-contaminants with uncooked foods such as fruit and vegetables. Meat from healthy livestock that is prepared and served in accordance with good hygiene and food safety principles remains safe to eat (OIE).

It is important to observe basic and general hygiene practices when handling animals' products, such as washing one's hands regularly, covering mouth and nose with a tissue if one coughs or sneezes, and not touching one's eyes, nose and mouth (FVE, OIE, WHO). It is also important to separate raw meat from other foods, cook to the right temperature, and refrigerate foods promptly when handling or preparing foods.

3. Can I infect my animal with Covid-19?

There is limited evidence that domestic animals can be infected with SARS-CoV-2, the causative agent of Covid-19 (AVMA, WSAVA). **There is no evidence to show that this new virus can be transmitted back to humans from pets or farm animals** (AVMA, BVA, CDC, ECDC, SYREAF, WSAVA, OIE).

To reduce the risk of humans infecting animals, it is important to respect general measures of hygiene, including washing one's hands with water and soap or sanitizer before and after handling our animals. It is important to wash the dogs' paws with soap and water (or wipes) after entering one's own's home following a walk. Any pet food tins, pet food bags and toys bought from a pet shop should be wiped clean with soap and water or not touched for 72 hours. It is also important to regularly clean our pet's food and water bowl, bedding material, and toys (AVMA).

It is important to regularly clean and disinfect the floor and other frequently touched surfaces. If these surfaces are dirty, first wash them with water and soap before disinfecting them (CDC).

4. Can I still walk my dog outdoors?

If you are not sick, it is important to continue to interact with your animals as usual. This includes walking, feeding, and playing with them (AVMA). If you are over 65 years or fall within the vulnerable groups, try to ask someone else to help with walking your dog. If this is not possible, you can walk your dog but keep it short and avoid meeting people.

When walking your dog avoid crowded areas and respect social distancing from other pet owners or pedestrians you may encounter while outdoors.

If you are on mandatory quarantine, you CANNOT leave the house to walk your dog.

5. Can I still let my cat go outdoors?

If you are not self-isolating or sick, it is important that you continue to interact with your cat as usual. If your cat is used to going outdoors, there is no need to

change its routines (AVMA, OIE). The most important aspect is to continue to practice good hand hygiene when handling your cats.

6. Can I still feed stray animals?

If you are not sick, you may still continue to feed stray animals. Ensure that you provide them with food you know they like.

If you are over 65 years or fall within the vulnerable groups, try to ask someone else to help. If absolutely not possible, you can go out to look after the animals and go back home – limit time outside of house and avoid meeting people.

It is important that you follow all precautionary measures while doing so, including washing your hands properly before and after, and not touching your face.

If you used to feed stray animals, and now are no longer able to, please send a text message (SMS) or call: 77550550; send an email to: rarmalta@gmail.com or contact your respective local council to ensure that the animals continue to be fed.

As restrictions might change, it may be advisable to have people recognized as designated feeders of stray animals, to ensure they continue to have access to areas which might be closed off (e.g. public gardens). Designated feeders need to register with their local council and need to carry with them their identity card when going to feed stray cats.

If you are on mandatory quarantine, you CANNOT leave the house to feed the stray animals.

7. I am elderly or fall in the vulnerable groups' category and own farm animals- what can I do?

Try to find someone to replace you, but if not possible, you can go out to look after your animals and go back home- limit the time outside the house and avoid meeting people. Please also send an email on: Covid19.sph.exemptions@gov.mt or directly to infoahwd.mafa@gov.mt for guidance.

8. Will I still be able to check on and feed my animals in case of a complete lock-down?

Feeding our animals is essential to guarantee both food security and animal welfare. Therefore, even in the case of a complete lock-down, you will still be allowed to check on and feed your animals. Documentation to show that you have the necessary approvals to be exempted from any lockdown restrictions, together with the ID Card number is to be always carried in case stopped by the authorities. You can contact the Animal Health and Welfare Department Customer care service on 22925588 or on infoahwd.mafa@gov.mt.

9. What should I do if I have been asked to self-isolate or am on mandatory quarantine?

If you have been asked to self-isolate or are on mandatory quarantine, you should not leave your house. If possible (e.g. if you have a garden where you can exercise your dog and your cat is happy to stay indoors), your pet should not leave the house either (WSAVA).

Remember to always wash your hands before after handling your pets.

If you have no symptoms, you can ask someone else (e.g. neighbours, friends) to take your dog out for a walk (MVA). In this case, it is important to maintain social distancing from the other person, and to adopt all necessary hygienic measures to reduce contact (e.g. person taking your dog out should have a separate leash).

If your animals (e.g. farm animals and horses) are located at a distance from your household, you should ask someone else (e.g. neighbours, friends) to take care of your animals for you.

10. What should I do if I am sick with Covid-19 and am self-isolating at home?

If you are sick with Covid-19 and have symptoms you cannot go out.

- Animals belonging to owners infected with COVID-19 should be kept indoors as much as possible (OIE).
- You should limit contact with your animals as a precautionary measure, and ideally have someone else in the household take care of them (MVSC, OIE).

- You should not share food, dishes or other utensils with your pets, kiss, or hug them (AVMA, CDC).
- If no-one else in the household can take care of your pet and handling is necessary, it is important to avoid intimate contact with your pet, follow all necessary hygienic precautions and wash hands properly before and after handling your pets (AVMA).

You may also arrange for someone else not living in the same household to take care of your pet in their own home for the period you will be unwell but avoid any contact with that person and adopt all necessary hygienic measures.

Service animals should be permitted with their handlers, but the handlers should be encouraged to wash their hands frequently and, if possible, wear face masks (CDC).

If your pet requires urgent veterinary attention, do not go directly to the vet but contact your trusted veterinarian **by phone** and inform them of the situation (MVA). The veterinarian will guide you according to your situation.

There is limited evidence on whether animals can act as fomites (i.e. mechanical vectors of virus), and no studies so far have evaluated whether fur or hair can be a source of transmission (SYREAF). As a precautionary measure, we recommend that pets living in a household with infected people be washed with shampoo suitable for pets to avoid any mechanical carriage of the virus, and for owners to continue to practice good hand hygiene.

11. Who will take care of my animal if I need to be hospitalized?

Preparedness is key:

- Prepare an emergency kit with two weeks' worth of food, any needed medications, together with directions on how the animals are usually handled (e.g. grooming, milking, cleaning of pens, etc.) (AVMA)
- Arrange for care of any animals left at home with family or friends should you be hospitalized (WSAVA).

If you require any assistance you may contact the Animal Health and Welfare Department on 1717.

12. How can I enter a house to feed animals if there was a positive case here before?

Before entering a house where a positive patient resided disinfection with appropriate products at recommended doses which are safe for animals should be undertaken immediately within the first 24 hours, to allow for feeders to then enter the household.

- Animal feeders should wash their hands before and after leaving the household, and try to clean their hands with an alcohol-based sanitizer after touching other items in the household (e.g. animal feed bags)
- Try to wash the pet and its bed with a shampoo suitable for pets the first time you visit them. If this is not possible, avoid intimate contact with the pet (e.g. kissing, snuggling), at least for the first few days.
- If possible, take your own equipment (e.g. dog leash, food bowl, toys; etc.); if this is not possible, wash the equipment with warm water and soap before using them.

If you are taking care of farm animals for someone, the same guidelines apply when going to their farm.

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