

Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Guidance for Veterinary Practice Staff

KEY POINTS:

- The veterinary practice is responsible for developing and executing a plan to monitor staff for fever or COVID-19 symptoms (cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing).
- Given community spread, all staff should self-monitor for symptoms each day prior to starting work under the practice's oversight and should not report to work if they exhibit any symptoms. See public health guidance for [screening](#).
 - As part of source control efforts, veterinary practice staff should wear a medical-grade mask for universal source control while they are in the veterinary facility. Employees need not wear a face covering when the employee is alone in a private office, or a cubicle with a solid partition that exceeds the height of the employee when standing.
- Physical distancing between staff and between staff and clients should be implemented in all areas of the practice as much as possible.
- Businesses including veterinary practices are required to report to the Department of Public Health when there are three or more confirmed cases of COVID-19 among employees within a span of 14 days with evidence of epidemiological linkage such as sharing a physical space. Report cases to Public Health at (888) 397-3993 or (213) 240-7821.

BACKGROUND:

Veterinary medicine is considered an essential service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since veterinary practice staff may be exposed to each other and clients, self-monitoring is crucial to decrease the risk of infection for everyone. In addition, veterinary practices must develop a physical distancing protocol for staff and have limited client interaction. Planning work tasks to incorporate greater distancing between staff makes the practice less likely to experience COVID-19 outbreaks, less likely to need to quarantine staff, and more likely to be able to stay open when a COVID-19 case occurs. These updated guidelines have evolved as a result of experience, the availability of published data on COVID-19, growing evidence of community transmission of COVID-19 and established infection control principles.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Veterinary practice staff should always wear masks for universal source control while they are in the facility. Surgical/procedure facemasks are recommended.
2. Veterinary practices should ensure 6 feet physical distancing is implemented throughout the facility, particularly in the break/lunchrooms when staff remove their facemask to eat their food. This can be achieved by moving frequently used workstations (e.g. at reception desk, doctor's desks) further away from each other, removing and spacing apart the seating in break areas, and creating staggered work shifts and break times.
3. The risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 is highest in indoors settings, especially those that are crowded or have poor ventilation. Facilities should prevent staff crowding in breakrooms, reception areas, and work rooms and ensure adequate [ventilation](#).
4. Practices should limit the number of individuals in a veterinary clinic to decrease crowding. This can be achieved by picking up animals from clients at their car or outside the practice and conducting consultations

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and payment over the phone. Another option may include utilizing telemedicine appointments when appropriate.

5. Close interactions between staff or between staff and clients should be as brief as is feasible. When social distancing from other team members is **not** feasible (e.g. restraining or procedure), veterinary practice staff must use appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) which includes a surgical/procedure mask and face shield.
 6. If practice staff have COVID-19 related symptoms, they should stay home from work and arrange for medical evaluation and/or testing as soon as possible.
 7. Veterinary practices should screen all staff prior to the start of working their shifts. Practices should develop and implement screening systems that cause the least amount of delays and disruption as possible (i.e., self-report, single-use disposable thermometers or thermal scanners, etc.). Practices may use this form: <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/Coronavirus/docs/business/EntryScreening.pdf>
 8. If veterinary practice staff develop fever or symptoms of possible COVID-19 while at work, they should notify their supervisor and leave the workplace immediately.
 9. Veterinary practice staff who are high risk [close contacts](#) to a presumed or confirmed COVID-19 case* should be sent home and follow [home quarantine orders](#) for 14 days. A close contact is defined as an individual who had prolonged close contact (i.e. they were within 6 feet for 15 or more minutes and/or they had direct unprotected contact with infectious secretions/excretions) with a confirmed case:
 - While not wearing a respirator or facemask
 - While not wearing eye protection if the case was not wearing a facemask.
 - a. Per home quarantine orders, close contacts should monitor themselves for fever or symptoms consistent with COVID-19. If symptoms develop, they should follow the [home isolation instructions](#) and notify the veterinary practice.
 - b. If a close contact has never had symptoms, they can return to work after 14 days.
 - c. If a close contact tests negative for SARS-CoV-2, they still must complete the 14-day quarantine.
- *COVID-19 cases are considered infectious beginning 2 days prior to symptom onset (or initial positive viral test if case is asymptomatic) until the time they meet criteria for discontinuing isolation.*
10. Veterinary practice managers should be familiar with general principles of addressing COVID-19 in the workplace by reviewing this [scenario-based COVID-19 in the workplace FAQ and](#) this guide to responding to [COVID-19 in the workplace](#).
 11. Veterinary practice staff with community-related exposures (including households), must notify their employer. The veterinary practice should determine if the exposure warrants quarantine based on the CDC's [Guidance for Community- Related Exposures](#).
 12. Staff with [underlying health conditions](#) or who are otherwise immunocompromised may be at high risk of serious illness and possibly death from COVID-19. Facilities may want to consider limiting exposure of high-risk staff to clients and other staff.
 13. Be diligent about cleaning and disinfection in the practice. Pay attention to high touch surfaces (doorknobs, toilet handles, phones, light switches, equipment and areas where employees share computers/tables/desks).



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14. Transmission of the virus in break rooms is of special concern. To help prevent COVID-19 exposure for staff in break rooms:

- a. Move break areas outdoors if possible.
- b. Consistently emphasize and encourage use of facemasks except when actively drinking and eating.
- c. Ensure 6 feet physical distancing between seats.
- d. Ensure hand sanitizer is readily available.
- e. Stagger lunch breaks and/or ask staff to sign-up for specific time slots to minimize the number of staff sharing the break room at any one time.
- f. Remove chairs in waiting rooms and break/lunchrooms to limit number of staff inside break room.
- g. Place signage in the waiting rooms, treatment rooms and break rooms to maintain 6ft physical distancing.

RETURN TO WORK PROTOCOL FOR VETERINARY PRACTICE STAFF WITH CONFIRMED OR SUSPECT COVID-19:

Share [this webpage](#) about isolation requirements with the staff member.

Veterinary staff with mild to moderate illness who are not severely immunocompromised can return to work:

- At least 10 days after symptom onset AND
- At least 24 hours since last fever without fever-reducing medication AND
- Improvement in symptoms.

Asymptomatic veterinary staff with laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 who are not severely immunocompromised should be excluded from work until 10 days have passed since the date of their first positive COVID-19 diagnostic test, assuming they have not subsequently developed symptoms. If they develop symptoms, follow above guidance.

Symptomatic veterinary staff with severe or critical illness or who are severely immunocompromised can return to work:

- At least 20 days after symptom onset AND
- At least 24 hours since last fever without fever-reducing medication AND
- Improvement in symptoms.

Note: Asymptomatic veterinary staff who are severely immunocompromised, should wait to return to work until 20 days since first positive viral diagnostic test. LAC DPH and CDC continue to not recommend re-testing for return to work clearance due to prolonged detection of RNA without any direct correlation with infectiousness as determined by viral culture studies.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FACILITIES EXCLUDING LARGE NUMBERS OF STAFF

In certain rare circumstances where there are critical staffing shortages, it may be permissible for some asymptomatic veterinary practice staff who are a close contact to a person with COVID-19 to continue to work during their quarantine period if they remain asymptomatic and wear a medical face mask for source control

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for the full 14 days after the exposure event. The veterinary practice staff must observe full home quarantine when not doing their essential work. Employers must be prepared for potential staffing shortages and have plans and processes in place to mitigate them. Allowing exposed staff to work does increase the risk of an outbreak in the facility. Every effort should be made to limit exposures.

REPORTING

Per the [Health Officer Order](#), businesses including veterinary practices are required to [report](#) to the Department of Public Health (by immediately calling 888-397-3993 or 213-240-7821) when there are three or more epidemiologically linked confirmed cases of COVID-19 among employees within a span of 14 days. Public Health will then provide the following: a case manager to guide the facility response and provide technical support, infection control guidance and site-specific control measures.

Additional Guidance:

[AVMA: COVID-19, What Veterinarians Need to Know](#)

[FDA: Listing of NIOSH approved masks and respirators for COVID-19](#)

If you have questions, email LAC DPH Veterinary Public Health at vet@ph.lacounty.gov or call 213-288-7060.

