

Animal Health Alert: Cluster of Human Flea-Borne Typhus Cases in Monrovia
8.18.2021

Dear Colleagues,

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LAC DPH) has identified six individuals with flea-borne typhus associated with the city and unincorporated area of Monrovia. They range in age between 8 – 74 years with reported symptom onset between February and June 2021. Three individuals were hospitalized, and all cases have recovered. LAC DPH is working to identify and reduce the environmental risk for exposure to flea-borne typhus in the area. An alert (see attached) was sent to area physicians to notify them of the increase in human cases and encourage them to test for the disease if it is suspected.

Flea-borne typhus is a disease that infected fleas can spread to humans. Bacteria (*Rickettsia typhi* and *R. felis*) found in infected fleas, and their feces, spread the disease. In Los Angeles County, the primary animals known to carry infected fleas include rats, cats, and opossums. People with significant exposure to fleas from these animals are at risk of acquiring flea-borne typhus. Pet dogs and cats that are not treated with flea-control products and allowed outdoors, are more likely to come in contact with infected fleas and carry them to humans. Although pets and other animals do not get sick from typhus, it can cause high fever, chills, headache, and rash in people. The illness can be treated in people with certain antibiotics. Typhus is not transmitted person-to-person.

Flea-borne typhus is considered endemic in LA County, and as a result, veterinarians should always discuss typhus when discussing flea control with pet owners. In recent years, the average number of flea-borne typhus reported cases in people in LA County has increased. Most cases occur in the summer and fall months. Places where there is an accumulation of trash that attracts wild animals like feral cats, rats and opossums that may carry an infected flea may increase the risk for human exposure.

Because flea-borne typhus is endemic in only a few parts of the USA (Southern California, Texas, and Hawaii), many veterinarians and pet owners may be unfamiliar with this risk to human health in our area. Therefore, education about typhus is a key part of preventing this disease.

How veterinarians can help protect the community from flea-borne typhus:

- 1. CLIENT EDUCATION: Promote appropriate year-round flea control for pets**
 - a. Advise pet owners on proper use of flea control products on pets. Adequate flea control is the number one way to protect your clients and their pets.
 - b. Advise pet owners not to feed wild or stray animals, to avoid drawing more flea hosts into the area.
 - c. Advise pet owners to keep their property clean, with trash securely sealed, to avoid attracting rodents and other wildlife and their fleas.

2. OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH: Animal health care workers and shelter staff are more at risk for this disease

- a. Use personal protective equipment (gloves, sleeves, gowns) and insect repellent to protect your staff at work

Download and distribute brochures about typhus (available in Spanish and English) at:
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/hea/library/topics/typhus/index.htm>

Educate yourself about typhus. Bookmark this page and read the latest about flea-borne typhus in LA County: <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/acd/VectorTyphus.htm>

Please call (213-288-7060) or email (vet@ph.lacounty.gov) if you have questions regarding flea-borne typhus or any other questions.

Sincerely,

Karen Ehnert, DVM, MPVM, DACVPM
Director, Veterinary Public Health
Los Angeles County Department of Public Health
313 N. Figueroa St, Room 1127
Los Angeles, CA 90012
(213) 288-7060
(213) 481-2375 Fax
kehnert@ph.lacounty.gov
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/>

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