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Prepare ahead of time when planning to travel with pets

Q: My husband and I will be taking our two dogs with us to a cabin on a lake for a vacation. Our dogs love the water. Are there diseases that they could get from the water?

A: Two waterborne diseases, leptospirosis and giardiasis, should receive consideration as you plan your vacation by the lake. In addition, any travel with pets increases their risk of exposure to internal and external parasites. Planning ahead to educate yourselves about diseases your pets could encounter away from home is smart.

First, I will describe leptospirosis and giardiasis, and then I will give you a strategy for keeping your pets healthy for your trip. The incidence of leptospires infection is highest in late summer and autumn, because the quantity of bacteria is highest in water and soil after a period of warm weather. Heavy rains in spring as we experienced this year increase the risk of leptospires bacterial infection for our area.

Most mammals, including people, are susceptible to leptospires bacterial infection. Symptoms of disease resemble the flu with headache, fever, chills and achiness in people. In dogs, the onset of disease is usually characterized by sudden fever, anorexia, lethargy and weakness.

Some dogs will have vomiting and diarrhea and/or bloody urine. This disease strikes hard and strikes fast. It requires immediate treatment to prevent kidney failure, liver damage or death. Diagnosis confirmation requires sophisticated tests on blood or urine samples that must be performed by a reference laboratory.

The leptospires bacteria enter the body through cuts in the skin or through mucus membranes -- eyes, nose and mouth. The bacteria are spread into water and moist soil by animals who have survived infection but still have the bacteria in their bodies. Fluids such as saliva and, especially, urine from these survivor animals contaminate the water and soils. Leptospires can live long term in the water and soil, but they are sensitive to freezing. Contact with contaminated water or moist soil would be a likely source of infection. Higher concentration of the bacteria may be found in stagnant water, so I would avoid letting your dogs play in any areas of stagnant water along the lake.

Prevention of leptospirosis should be discussed with your family veterinarian. Vaccination of dogs at risk is worthwhile. Because the duration of protection for the leptospirosis vaccine is not as long as that of many other vaccines for dogs, your veterinarian may suggest a booster vaccine for your dogs a month or two prior to your trip.

Interestingly, veterinarians generally accept that cats do not develop disease from leptospires bacteria. It is hypothesized that cats have developed a sort of immunity due to their longtime predatory history with rodents. Wild rodents are commonly carriers of the leptospires bacteria.

Giardiasis is another water-associated disease that, unfortunately, can affect both humans and pets. Infection occurs when the microscopic Giardia protozoa enters the body by way of the mouth from contaminated water, food or unwashed hands.

This protozoal parasite can live on dry surfaces for months, but we think of it as being most commonly associated with lakes, rivers, ponds or streams that are contaminated by sewage or the feces from infected wildlife.

Diarrhea and, sometimes, vomiting are the most common symptoms of disease. Some infected animals may not show any symptoms at all; such animals are the carriers or reservoirs for spread of the protozoa. These carriers are often the source of spread of Giardia in places where animals are living in crowded conditions.

Very young, elderly and immunocompromised individuals are at highest risk for severe disease.

Laboratory tests performed in veterinary hospitals and ordered through reference laboratories are used to confirm giardiasis. Treatment with a course of oral medications is usually effective, but success is somewhat dependent on the overall health of the patient. No effective vaccine exists for giardiasis; your best prevention is a healthy immune system, good hygiene and avoidance.

Hopefully, your vacation will be loaded with fun instead of troubles.

Here is my "to do" list to consider for your dogs. Consult your family veterinarian with this list so that the details can be customized for your dogs.

- ◆ Learn where you can seek veterinary services near your vacation site -- just in case.
- ◆ Feed your dogs strictly their regular diet of dog food and clean water to prevent GI distress.
- ◆ Feed a little less than usual on travel days.
- ◆ Pack a container of water and bowl for the car ride.
- ◆ Apply an effective flea and tick prevention product before your trip.
- ◆ Take some disposable gloves and a tick removal tool with you.
- ◆ Keep your dogs on heartworm and intestinal roundworm, hookworm and whipworm prevention.
- ◆ Be prepared for bee stings.
- ◆ Have your dogs tested for fecal parasites before you go, when you come back and one month later.

Enjoy your trip!