COVID-19 Guidance for Veterinary Clinics in Georgia

General Operations
On March 23, 2020, Governor Brian Kemp issued Executive Order No. 03.23.20.01 to limit large gatherings statewide, order “shelter in place” for medically fragile populations, and close bars and nightclubs in Georgia. To provide guidance consistent with this Order, the Georgia Department of Public Health designated “Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers” to help state, local, tribal, and industry partners as they work to protect communities, while ensuring continuity of functions critical to public health and safety, as well as economic and national security. Persons employed in the field of veterinary medicine are deemed “essential workforce” through the Department of Public Health’s Administrative Order. The Order encourages partners to explore ways to use technology or other means for this essential workforce to continue providing services while minimizing the spread of COVID-19. Please note this guidance is subject to change as the pandemic evolves.

Veterinary practice owners/managers can consult the OSHA Guidance for Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19 (link below) for assistance in determining the exposure risk of their employees and ways to reduce risk. Also, the CDC Guidelines for Employers provide guidance on reducing transmission and maintaining a healthy work environment and continued operations. These recommendations include but are not limited to:

1. Requiring sick employees to stay home from work
2. Disinfecting commonly used surfaces and equipment frequently and liberally with an appropriate disinfectant.
3. Promoting frequent handwashing by providing areas and soap for handwashing
4. Encouraging respiratory etiquette, such as covering coughs and sneezes
5. Considering strategies to minimize face-to-face contact

Interaction with clients in veterinary clinics also provides opportunities for transmission of COVID-19. Clinic/hospital operations can be altered to reduce exposure risk and transmission. Helpful recommendations can be found in "COVID 19: What Veterinarians Need to Know" and FAQs for Veterinary Clinics by the AVMA.

Veterinary clinics can consider the following:
1. Limiting all non-emergency operations, especially for clients who have any signs of respiratory illness
2. Using telemedicine whenever possible for clients with a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship
3. If a patient needs to be seen, limiting contact between employees and clients by
   1. Delaying non-emergent appointments
   2. Meeting clients at their cars for intake and conveying diagnostic and treatment recommendations over the phone
   3. Using washable, in-house leashes for patient intake
4. Wearing gloves when intaking patients and handwashing after patient handling
5. Leaving unscheduled time between appointments to allow clients to practice social distancing
6. Disinfecting pet carriers when they enter the facility with a disinfecting wipe

Operations Involving Clients that are Sick

Prior to arrival, clients should be advised to reschedule all non-emergent appointments if they are feeling ill. If a client arrives feeling ill or report they are sick with COVID-19 the above information on limiting contact should be followed and non-emergent appointments rescheduled. People with confirmed or suspect COVID-19 are required to self-isolate at home for 72 hours after resolution of fever without fever-reducing meds and improvement of symptoms OR 7 days after illness onset, whichever is longer, therefore should not be in public while infectious. There may be an occasion when animals belonging to an ill person or animals from a household with recent COVID-19 illnesses must be seen due to an emergent issue or need to be boarded. In this case, limiting person-to-person contact is key in reducing exposure risk, but also be aware the role of animals as fomites in COVID-19 transmission is not fully understood. Therefore, if the patient of a sick client must be examined, precautions should be taken.

These include but are not limited to:

1. Facilitating patient presentation by a healthy family member or associate if possible
2. Performing patient intake at the client’s car
3. Wearing appropriate PPE when intaking the patient and handwashing after intaking or handling the patient
4. If possible, the patient should be bathed by a staff member wearing appropriate PPE, to minimize the unknown risk of fomite transmission, OR, the patient should be isolated with minimal contact for 3 days (if boarding)
5. Dedicating a single staff member to handle, perform procedures, and administer treatments to the patient
6. Bringing the patient through a side-entrance and performing examination, procedures, and treatments in a dedicated exam room near that side-entrance when possible

Clinician’s Brief released a COVID-19 Owner Contact Decision Tree that may be helpful in deciding how to handle patient admission.

Personal Protective Equipment

If interaction with a sick client cannot be avoided, appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be used. However, the nation is currently experiencing shortages in PPE. The FDA produced letters to healthcare providers regarding mask and gown and medical gloves conservation strategies. While these strategies are targeted toward human healthcare providers, some of these strategies can be considered in veterinary practice. If your facility
cannot provide the appropriate materials to employees, consider referring a sick client to a different facility with adequate supplies.

COVID-19 Risk to Pets
There is no evidence to support that domestic animals, including pets, may be a source of infection with SARS-CoV-2 (virus causing COVID-19). To date, there have not been any reports of pets or other animals becoming sick, and there is no evidence that domestic animals including pets can spread SARS-CoV-2. Further studies are needed to understand if and how different animals could be affected by COVID-19. CDC recommends people who are sick with COVID-19 (either suspected or confirmed), restrict contact with pets and other animals, just like it is recommended to avoid contact with other people.

For clients with COVID-19 illness, CDC recommends they have another healthy member of the household care for their animals while they are sick. They should avoid contact with their pets including, petting, snuggling, being kissed or licked, and sharing food. If they must care for their pets or be around animals while they are sick, they should wash their hands before and after interacting with them.

Testing of Companion Animals and Livestock
Because the COVID-19 situation is evolving, public and animal health officials may decide to test certain animals out of an abundance of caution and to help elucidate if there is any risk of animals serving as fomites. The decision to test will be made collaboratively between local, state or federal public and animal health officials. At this time, testing for companion animals will only be done if animal and public health officials agree testing should occur due to a link to a known human case of COVID-19. Testing the general companion animal population is not indicated.

Full URLs to previous hyperlinks are included below for referencing.