

Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19): Guidance for Handlers of Service and Therapy Animals

What We Know

- Based on the limited information available to date, the risk of animals spreading COVID-19 to people is considered to be low.
- We are still learning about this virus, but it appears that it can spread from people to animals in some situations. A small number of pets (including dogs and cats) worldwide have been reported to be infected with the virus that causes COVID-19, mostly after close contact with people with COVID-19 and have recovered.
- Infected pets might get sick or they might not have any symptoms. Of the pets that have become sick, most only had mild illness and fully recovered.

Definitions

- **Service animals** are defined as dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, service animals must be permitted to remain with their handlers. For more detailed information on the American with Disabilities Act provisions regarding service animals see ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm.
- A **therapy animal** is used in a type of animal-assisted intervention or treatment process.

General Guidelines

- Take measures to protect pets from infection. For example, avoid unnecessary contact with people or other animals outside the household. Use your best judgment when taking an animal into a location where it could be exposed to COVID-19.
- It is generally considered safe to use therapy animals in facilities, however individual facilities that normally use therapy animals may or may not be allowing them at this time.
- If you are a service or therapy animal handler, and **you get diagnosed** with COVID-19, see DC Health Guidance for Persons Who Tested Positive for COVID-19 at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance.
- If your **service or therapy animal gets sick** after contact with a person with COVID-19, call your veterinarian. If the animal tests positive for the virus that causes COVID-19, follow recommendations for what to do if your pet tests positive at cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/positive-pet.html.

Guidance to Protect Service Animals

- Service animals may need to be around other people and animals while working. When possible, both the handler and the animal should stay at least 6 feet away from other people and animals.
- If a service animal is sick, call a veterinarian, and do not go out in public with the animal.
- When possible, do not take a service animal into settings in which people are infected with COVID-19 or facilities where you cannot prevent interactions with people who may have COVID-19.
- Avoid contact between sick people and the service animal as much as possible. If contact cannot be avoided, the sick person should wear a cloth face covering when around the animal.

- Clean and disinfect service animal collars, vests, leashes or harnesses, and other supplies frequently.
- Do not wipe or bathe service animals with chemical disinfectants, alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, or any other products not approved for animal use. There is no evidence that the virus can spread to people from the skin, fur, or hair of pets.
- Do not put face coverings on service animals. Covering an animal's face could harm them.

Guidance to Protect Therapy Animals

Facilities that normally use therapy animals may not allow them at this time because people in many of these settings are at higher risk for serious illness with COVID-19. Follow DC Health guidance and facility protocols for social distancing, face coverings, and other ways to prevent COVID-19 from spreading. **If therapy animals are invited to a facility or other setting, follow the steps below.**

- Therapy animal visits require some level of contact between clients and the therapy animal team. When possible, keep animals at least 6 feet away from people and animals not participating in the visit. Handlers and participants must wear a cloth face covering during the visit unless a person is unable to wear a mask due to a medical condition, disability or is physically unable to remove a mask.
- Do not take therapy animals to visits if the animals are sick or have tested positive for the virus that causes COVID-19.
- People with symptoms of COVID-19 should not touch, be close to, or interact with therapy animals. If someone was sick with COVID-19, they should wait until they recover to interact with therapy animals.
- Before and after every contact, the handler and anyone petting or having contact with the animal should wash their hands.
- Do not use items that multiple people handle, particularly if items are brought to multiple facilities between therapy visits (for example, leashes, harnesses, toys, or blankets). If items like leashes must be brought between facilities, disinfect them after each use or facility.
- Do not let other people handle items that go into the animal's mouth, such as toys and treats.
- Disinfect items such as toys, collars, leashes, harnesses, therapy vests and scarves, and food/water bowls frequently.
- Do not allow therapy animals to lick or give 'kisses'.
- Do not wipe or bathe therapy animals with chemical disinfectants, alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, or any other products not approved for animal use. There is no evidence that the virus can spread to people from the skin, fur, or hair of pets.
- Do not put face coverings on therapy animals. Covering an animal's face could harm the animal.

Additional Resources

- For more information about protecting pets during COVID-19, see the following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) webpage: [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/pets.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/pets.html).
- For additional DC Health guidance, including the *Guidance for Pet Owners* and *Frequently Asked Questions about Pets and Animals*, see [coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance](https://www.coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance).