

Protecting Yourself and Patients from Leptospirosis

Learn how to have confident conversations with phone shoppers and clients

By Wendy S. Myers



The answers that receptionists give would shock you. When our consulting firm calls practices nationwide for our mystery phone shopper training, we ask receptionists simple questions—the same ones any pet owner would ask. When inquiring about an exam and vaccines for a new pet, we asked a receptionist, “What is Lepto?”

She replied, “Well, I don’t know actually how to explain it. Hold on for just a second, okay?” After one minute and 10 seconds of listening to dead air, the caller was told, “Lepto is a bacteria. You get it from standing water. If your dog is going to be outside, like if it’s any kind of a hunting dog, that’s when we would recommend it. If your puppy is just going to be an indoor dog and go to the backyard, it’s not something to worry about.”

Karen and Gary Joiner of Boulder, Colorado, had plenty to worry about. Their 3-year-old Siberian husky, Chinook, succumbed to Leptospirosis-induced kidney failure and died. They also had a new puppy, Tosca, to protect from the deadly disease. Raccoons in the family’s backyard were to blame.

Client relationships begin—or end—when phone shoppers call your hospital. That’s why every team member needs a foundation of knowledge on wellness and preventive services, including your hospital’s protocol for Leptospirosis. Ask yourself, “Is my staff giving people the right information?”

Confident, friendly conversations can convert phone shoppers into new clients for your practice. Visit www.csvets.com for information on our Mystery Phone Shopper Training Program. Providing accurate information over the phone is the first step in protecting canine patients from the growing threat of Leptospirosis.

Confidently Communicating With Clients

Have doctors educate your staff on Leptospirosis. Explain the disease, how its spread and protocols for prevention. Leptospirosis is a deadly bacterial disease spread by wildlife including raccoons, skunks, possums, squirrels, rats and sometimes other dogs. The Leptospirosis bacteria is shed in urine, and dogs become infected after contact with fresh urine of infected animals. Typical dog behavior of sniffing, licking and eating grass can set them up for exposure. If dogs drink from standing water containing the bacteria, they also can get Leptospirosis.

Symptoms may include vomiting, diarrhea, fever, depression, sore muscles, shivering, difficulty breathing, coughing and rapid dehydration. Getting treatment quickly to prevent renal failure can mean the difference between life and death for some patients. Today, Leptospirosis is the #1 cause of acute renal failure in dogs.

As housing developments encroach on areas inhabited by wildlife, the incidence of Leptospirosis will continue to climb, predicts Dr. Kenneth R. Harkin, DACVIM, associate professor of small animal medicine at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. At-risk dogs include farm dogs, dogs allowed to roam, hunting dogs, dogs living in suburban areas with wildlife traffic in their yards, and dogs living in urban areas where rodents are a problem, he advises.



Because Leptospirosis is a zoonotic disease, also educate clients about high-risk activities such as hunting, trail biking, freshwater swimming, rafting, canoeing, kayaking and participating in sports in muddy fields. Having pets and farm animals vaccinated against *Leptospira* can decrease the chances of infection.

Ask clients risk-assessment questions

during wellness exams such as:

- Does your dog play outdoors where exposure or contact with wildlife is possible?
- Does your dog ever drink from ponds or puddles?
- Do you bring your dog along while walking, hiking, camping, picnicking, hunting or fishing?

- Are skunks, possums, raccoons or rats found in your area?
- Has Leptospirosis been diagnosed in your area in either people or dogs?

You can download a risk-assessment questionnaire from the National Pet Wellness Month website at www.npwm.com. Teach clients to limit pets' chances of exposure by removing food, garbage or nesting materials from their yards that may attract wildlife. Visiting your practice annually to have their pets vaccinated against *Leptospira* is even more important.

Think about every tool you use to communicate with clients, including your hospital website, brochures, reminders, message on hold and more. Incorporate educational information on Leptospirosis and your hospital's protocols for vaccination and prevention. For example, your message on hold might say, "Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease that causes liver and kidney failure. This deadly disease is spread by urine from infected raccoons, deer, rats and wildlife. Our hospital has a vaccine to protect your dog. Vaccination requires two injections two to three weeks apart, then once a year thereafter. Ask our receptionist about protecting your dog from Leptospirosis when we speak with you."

Protect Your Team, Too



After a North Carolina emergency and specialty practice saw five confirmed cases of Leptospirosis in one month and had an employee become infected after placing a urinary catheter in a patient while not wearing gloves, they faxed a warning to area veterinary hospitals. Additional employees underwent Lepto testing at a significant cost to the emergency practice. They warned area clinics, "Consider all urine an infectious substance!" Let your healthcare team know that Lepto can enter the body either orally or through skin wounds. Clinical signs in people can be vague, including headache, nausea, lethargy and body ache.

Persons at increased risk for Leptospirosis include animal healthcare workers, farmers, miners, fish farmers and processors, sewage and canal workers, cane harvesters and soldiers. Because your staff works on the frontline of exposure, make sure your hospital sets protocols for handling urine, placing urinary catheters and cleaning cages and kennels. Fort Dodge Animal Health offers a laminated cage card that says, "WARNING! Wear Gloves When Handling. I have or may have Leptospirosis, which can be transmitted through urine. Wear gloves when handling me and my urine. Dispose of my laundry and trash in the infectious

disease cans. Collect my urine when I go outside and dispose of it properly. After my stay, clean my kennel with Nolvasan.”

Gather resources on Leptospirosis from pharmaceutical representatives, your local health department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov). Provide in-clinic training for your team on zoonotic diseases such as Leptospirosis through pharmaceutical representatives and online courses. For example, www.vetmedteam.com offers two free online courses on zoonotic diseases. You can access 400 staff training videos online from Animal Care Training at www.4act.com. Choose a free 30-day trial, monthly online subscription or order videos individually for your practice library.

Investing in team training will lead to confident conversations with phone shoppers and clients who trust your recommendations about protecting pets against Leptospirosis.

About the Author:



Wendy S. Myers owns Communication Solutions for Veterinarians in Denver. Her consulting firm helps teams improve compliance, client service and practice management. Communication Solutions for Veterinarians has provided mystery phone shopper training to more than 2,600 receptionists nationwide. Wendy is a partner in Animal Hospital Specialty Center, a 13-doctor AAHA-accredited referral practice offering internal medicine, surgery, neurology, oncology, specialty dentistry, and emergency care in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. She is the author of four books and five videos. Subscribe to Communication Solutions for Veterinarians' e-newsletter on our website at: www.csvets.com. E-mail Wendy at: wmyers@csvets.com.