



Preventing the Spread of Disease in Foster Homes

Foster pets sometimes bring infectious diseases into a foster home, some of which are difficult to get rid of in the environment. These infectious diseases can be spread to other pets and people. To help prevent the spread of disease, it is important to vaccinate all pets, isolate pets who have infectious diseases, be diligent about cleaning and disinfection, and avoid disease transmission through the air or via fomites.

Spread of Disease

- Spread of disease can be from pet to pet.
- Pets can also spread disease to people, and vice versa. So, preventing the spread of disease in foster homes is also about protecting people. Remember that children and immunocompromised individuals, such as HIV patients, or people undergoing chemotherapy are more susceptible to disease.
- Some infectious diseases are species specific and cannot spread to a pet of a different species, nor to people, but others are not.

Increased Susceptibility to Disease in Shelter/Rescue Group Setting

- Many animals coming into animal shelters and rescue groups may not have been vaccinated before. Since vaccination can prevent certain diseases and reduce the severity of others, a lack of vaccination increases a pet's susceptibility to disease.
- There are animals entering shelters and rescues who may have decreased immunity. For example, kittens and puppies who are under 6 months of age have immature immune systems compared to adults, and any immunity they have from their mother's milk is wearing off or has already worn off. Cats who are infected with Feline Leukemia Virus or Feline Immunodeficiency Virus are immunocompromised. Since decreased immunity causes a pet's body to have trouble fighting off infection, that means increased susceptibility to disease.



- A shelter or rescue group has many animals coming in who may have been exposed to infectious disease before intake, but are not yet showing symptoms. Then, by the time they show symptoms, other animals at the shelter have already been exposed and may become sick.
- Even the most well-run shelters are stressful. Stress can cause apparently healthy animals to start shedding infectious diseases that were in their system, but dormant, or inactive; a very common example of this is herpesvirus, a cause of upper respiratory disease in cats. Stress can also make pets more likely to become sick if they're exposed to infectious disease.
- When shelters or rescues operate beyond their physical and staffing capacities, overcrowding occurs. High numbers of animals, living in close proximity, make it much easier for disease to spread.
- Housing pets in foster homes greatly reduces stress and addresses overcrowding, decreasing the risk of a foster pet becoming sick.

New Foster Pets: The First Two Weeks

- Even though the risk of getting sick is lower than it would be in a shelter or rescue setting, extra precautions should be taken during the first two weeks that new foster pets are in your home. This is the time that they are most likely to become sick, even if they initially appear healthy. It is best to isolate them in an area of the home that is easy to clean and disinfect.

Diseases Commonly Seen in Shelter/Rescue Group Pets

- If foster pets do become sick, the most common conditions tend to be respiratory infections. The disease in cats is called “Feline Upper Respiratory Infection” – or just “URI” for short. In dogs, it’s called Canine Respiratory Disease Complex, or more commonly -- “Kennel Cough.” Symptoms may include sneezing, nasal discharge, eye discharge, congestion, and/or coughing.
- Less common diseases are feline panleukopenia or canine parvovirus, and ringworm. Both feline panleukopenia and canine parvovirus can cause severe vomiting and diarrhea, both of which are important to address as quickly as possible.
- Ringworm is not really a worm; it’s caused by a fungus. It can cause circular patches of hair loss, and occurs most often in kittens and cats. It is extremely contagious and difficult to control, so if you are concerned about it, you should contact your foster manager.
- These diseases vary in how easy they are to get rid of in the environment. For example, some viruses are easily killed by regular household cleaners, and others cannot be killed without using a special type of disinfectant or a dilution of household bleach. For more detail, see the [Maddie’s Cleaning and Disinfection in Foster Homes](#) flash class.



- The good news is that the most common diseases tend to be easy to destroy. The viruses and bacteria that cause Feline URI and Canine “Kennel Cough” are easy to eliminate from the environment, with one exception: feline calicivirus. If a cat with calicivirus sneezes on a wall, and that wall is not cleaned and disinfected, the calicivirus can live in the dried nasal discharge on the wall for up to a month.
- Fortunately, the diseases that are difficult to eradicate from the environment are less common, and include feline panleukopenia virus, canine parvovirus, and ringworm. Feline panleukopenia virus and canine parvovirus can persist in the environment for years. Ringworm spores can also survive for years, tend to get everywhere, and it can be hard to get rid of them all.
- We won’t always know which infectious agents, if any, we are dealing with when a foster pet first starts showing symptoms. It is best to err on the side of caution, and take precautions to prevent the spread of disease.

How to Prevent the Spread of Disease

- Vaccinate Pets
 - One of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of disease between the same species is to vaccinate pets.
 - Some vaccines provide essentially full protection against disease. If an adult cat or dog is fully protected against a certain disease, and they get exposed to it, they will not get sick, and will not spread it to others.
 - Some vaccines provide partial protection against disease. These vaccines decrease the chance that a pet will catch an infectious disease, and they decrease the severity of disease if a pet does get sick. A pet will recover faster, which means that he or she may be contagious to others, but for shorter periods of time.
 - Foster pets should be vaccinated, ideally immediately upon arrival to an animal shelter or rescue group, before they go into their new foster homes.
 - Resident pets in a foster home should also be current on their vaccinations before foster pets are welcomed into the home.
- Isolate Pets Who Have Infectious Disease
 - To help prevent the spread of disease from sick pets to healthy ones, isolate pets who have infectious disease.
 - Sick pets should be isolated in an area of the home that is easily cleaned and disinfected. The room should contain the supplies being used for the sick pet, nothing else. These supplies should also be easy to clean and disinfect.



- For more information on how the type of housing and supplies chosen affects the ease and effectiveness of cleaning and disinfection, please see the [Maddie's Cleaning and Disinfection in Foster Homes](#) flash class.
- Avoid Disease Transmission Through the Air
 - Some infectious diseases can be transmitted through the air. "Kennel Cough," in dogs is a good example. Viruses and bacteria are coughed out, become airborne, and can travel long distances to be inhaled by a healthy dog. This process is called aerosolization. This is not as much of a concern with cats with upper respiratory infections, as they typically don't cough. Even if they do cough, their lungs are too small to generate significant aerosolization.
 - To help avoid disease transmission through the air, keep the doors closed to isolation areas and keep healthy pets as far away from the isolation area as possible.
- Avoid Disease Transmission Through Fomites
 - What are fomites?
 - A fomite is a nonliving object that can carry infectious organisms on its surface. A lot of things can be fomites.
 - Fomites can be anything with traces of a sick pet's body secretions or fur on them. Body secretions include nasal discharge, saliva, vomit, diarrhea and blood. Essentially, this means that fomites are all surfaces and objects that a sick pet has come into direct contact with. Like floors, walls, bedding, toys, food and water bowls, crates and pens, collars, leashes, scales, and people's hands and clothing.
 - Since people's hands and clothing can be fomites, any surface or object that you touch after handling a sick pet but before hand washing becomes a fomite too. Like doorknobs, light switches, stair railing, stepstools, furniture, writing pens, and thermometers.
 - Fomites can also be items used for cleaning and disinfection. Like brooms, mops, mop buckets, sponges and rags. These items can still be fomites even if they contain a disinfectant such as diluted bleach. Debris, light, and water can inactivate the disinfectant.
 - Dirty laundry and trash often contain the most fomites of all, so transport them carefully. Wear gloves, and consider double bagging dirty laundry and trash.
 - How to Avoid Disease Transmission Through Fomites
 - Use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). This means protective clothing, gloves, and footwear. It is important to understand how to put them on and take them off properly.
 - Traffic management is important too. Limit the number of people going in and out of an isolation area, and don't go in more frequently than necessary to properly care for the



medical and behavioral needs of your pet. It's a good idea to place signs on doors as reminders.

- Dog walking can be challenging. For puppies, you can use pee pads to avoid taking them outside. For adult dogs, there is no choice but to walk them. Find the shortest path from the isolation area to the outdoors.
 - Smaller dogs can be carried outside. Keep your sick dog on a leash, even if carried outside. Confine other pets behind closed doors temporarily to keep them out of the way.
 - Designate one small area outdoors for a "potty spot" outside that cannot be accessed by other dogs. This could be an area outside of a fenced in backyard, or a separate fenced in area.
 - Once your sick dog has been walked, clean and disinfect the pathway from the isolation area to the outdoors.
 - One of the most important ways to avoid disease transmission through fomites is to clean and disinfect all possible fomites.
- Clean and Disinfect
 - Cleaning is the removal of dirt and debris, such as cat litter or pieces of food, followed by washing with soap/detergent and water. Cleaning mechanically removes viruses, bacteria, and other germs that are on a surface or object, but it does not kill them.
 - Disinfection is the application of any agent, such as diluted bleach, that actually kills the germs.
 - It is very important to clean and disinfect all possible fomites to help prevent the spread of disease in the foster home. This is especially true if a foster pet or resident pet has an infectious disease that is difficult to get rid of in the environment, like feline panleukopenia virus, canine parvovirus, feline calicivirus, and ringworm.
 - For how-to instructions, see the [Maddie's Cleaning and Disinfection in Foster Homes](#) flash class.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- Remember that the use of Personal Protective Equipment, PPE, is one way of avoiding the spread of disease through fomites. PPE is protective clothing, gloves, and footwear.
- Protective clothing includes smocks, coveralls, or gowns. They should be long sleeved, and ideally long enough to reach mid-calf or ankle level.
- Protective gloves are disposable nitrile or latex exam gloves.
- Protective footwear may be rubber boots or disposable booties.



- Do not wear PPE outside of the isolation area. Put it on in front of the isolation area and then take it off in front of the isolation area. The only exception would be to carry or walk a dog outside.
- It is important to understand how to properly put on PPE. Put on the rubber boots or booties first. Then put on the gown, and fasten it in the back. Then put gloves on, with the gloves covering the ends of gown sleeves.
- Taking off PPE must be done very carefully to avoid contaminating your underlying clothing and hands with fomites from your sick pet. Gloves should be taken off first, the gown next, and the boots or booties last.

Helpful Tips

- Consider designating just one person in the household to care for sick pets. That person should avoid handling healthy pets in the household. If that is not possible, take care of the healthy pets first before handling the sick ones.
- Wear two pairs of disposable exam gloves instead of just one pair. This will help keep hands clean and disease-free. Put on the first pair before putting on the boots or booties. Take off the first pair after removing the boots or booties.
- Don't forget to wash your hands frequently. Hands should always be washed after removing PPE, even if you wore a second pair of disposable gloves.

