July 9, 2014

Dear Veterinarian,

On July 1, 2014, tularemia was confirmed in a cat from Dakota County. The cat, a 2 year old indoor/outdoor neutered male, presented to an Apple Valley veterinary clinic with a temperature of 106.9, oral ulcers, anorexia, and lethargy. The cat was euthanized on June 25th at a local emergency clinic and submitted for necropsy at the University of Minnesota Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory. Tularemia was suspected based on necropsy and culture, and confirmed at the MDH Public Health Laboratory.

Veterinarians in the metro area and throughout the state should be alert for cases of tularemia in cats, dogs, and wild animals, and take appropriate precautions (such as wearing gloves) when handling suspect cases.

Tularemia is a zoonotic disease caused by the bacterium Francisella tularensis and affects a wide range of species. The organism can be transmitted by arthropods, such as ticks and horseflies, and through contact with infected animals, most commonly lagomorphs and rodents. Cats can become infected after hunting infected rodents or rabbits; sheep and horses may develop tularemia from infected tick bites. Dogs are relatively resistant to infection, but cases have been reported. This cat is the fifth cat to be confirmed with tularemia in Minnesota since 2008. Clinical signs seen in these cases are high fever (104.5°F-106.9°F), lethargy, lymphadenopathy, and ulcerations of the tongue and palate. Tularemia has been confirmed in cats from rural, urban, and suburban environments. While outdoor or indoor/outdoor animals are at highest risk, tularemia has been identified in indoor cats, with no obvious exposure.

Diagnosis is confirmed by culture, PCR, and DFA of clinical specimens and serologically by a four-fold rise in titer. Every effort should be made to collect pre-treatment culture specimens from suspect cases. Please check with the Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (612-625-8787) prior to submitting animals for necropsy or clinical specimens for testing.

Humans can also acquire tularemia, though it is not transmitted person-to-person. The incubation period for tularemia in humans is generally 2-5 days (range, 2-14 days). Acute symptoms include sudden onset of fever, chills, joint and muscle pain, headache, and nausea. Please consult your healthcare provider and notify MDH if you have symptoms consistent with tularemia and have recently cared for a suspect tularemia patient.

For more information, please call Tory Whitten or Dr. Joni Scheftel at the Minnesota Department of Health (651-201-5414).

Sincerely,

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