

GUIDELINES FOR PETS IN FACILITIES

Long-Term Care and Retirement Homes

Introduction

Animals have been found to reduce loneliness and social isolation for residents in facility settings.¹ While pet visitation and pet therapy programs are important for the health and well being of those accessing the programs, they may also increase the risk of infectious disease transmission. Those at greatest health risk include people over 65 years of age, immune-compromised persons, anyone who is pregnant, and children under five years of age. Additionally, persons with cognitive disabilities are considered high risk as they may exhibit behaviors that increase their risk of exposure to infectious agents.²

The health risks related to animals in a facility can be minimized through proper handling, appropriate restrictions, and proper cleaning practices. Key risk factors for pet-associated infections include improper pet care, handling, and hand hygiene, as well as the improper disposal of pet waste and the use of kitchen sinks for animal care.³

York Region Public Health provides the following guidelines to facility operators to mitigate the risk of transmitting zoonotic microorganisms from animals to residents. It is recommended that facilities have a pet care plan/policy regarding pets who live in or visit the facility.

Choose appropriate animals

Facilities should screen animals that will reside in facilities and visit residents on the following basis:

- Type of animal: Dogs are preferable to cats, as cats cannot be trained to reliably provide safe interactions;⁴
- Vaccination status: Ensure animals have up-to-date rabies vaccinations. Keep a record of the vaccination status on-site
- General animal health: Animals should have annual check-ups to ensure they are healthy and should not exhibit any signs of illness. If animals have any of the following issues, they cannot visit residents: urinary or fecal incontinence, open wounds, ear or skin infections, flea or tick infestations, or signs of distress
- Cleanliness: Animals should be bathed and groomed before visiting the facility

¹ Interventions Associated with Reduced Loneliness and Social Isolation in Older Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. Hoang P, King JA, Moore S, et al. JAMA Netw Open. 2022 Oct 3;5(10):e2236676

² Recommendations for the Management of Animals in Child Care Settings, 2018. Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, March 2018

³ Guidelines for Animal-assisted Interventions in Health Care Facilities. Lefebvre S, Golab G, Christensen E, et al. AJIC., March 2008; 36(2): 78-85.

⁴ Animals in Healthcare Facilities: Recommendations to Minimize Potential Risks. Murthy R, Bearman G, Brown S, et al. Infection Control & Hospital Epidemiology, May 2015, 36(5):495-516.

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- Age and temperament: Choose animals who have been in their owner's home for at least six months before entering the facility. Screen animals by age appropriateness and temperament. Animals should not exhibit negative, aggressive, or fearful behaviour. Animals should be at least one year old to ensure they have completed all vaccinations, and they should not be pregnant (higher risk of aggressive behaviors). Animals displaying inappropriate behaviour should be removed from the home and visiting privileges should be revoked
- High health risk animals, such as reptiles, spiders and amphibians are not permitted because they shed proportionately more disease-causing agents

Restricted access

Facilities should ensure that animals' access within the home is restricted to reduce the spread of disease and promote the health and well being of the animal.

- Animals and their dwellings must not be in food preparation or storage areas, dining areas, laundry, sterile and clean storage areas to avoid infectious disease contamination
- Animals should not be allowed in chemical storage or medication areas for their safety
- Facility staff must take every reasonable and practical effort to keep animals away from residents and staff with allergies, phobias, or dislikes. Residents who do not wish to have contact with animals shall have documentation in their care plans and/or signage on the door to their rooms
- **Animal visits should have the following restrictions:**
 - Limit an animal's visit to one hour or less in the facility to reduce animal fatigue
 - For each visit, only one animal per handler should be allowed⁴ Always keep animals on a leash or in a pet carrier and under the control of the handler
 - Prevent them from having contact with residents' invasive devices, open wounds/non-intact skin and bandages, food, and ill residents. Take any other additional precautions as advised by staff and residents
 - Discourage animals from lying on residents' beds unless there is an impermeable mattress barrier, and an additional sheet or blanket is used to protect the bed linens which is laundered after the animal visit
 - Prevent animal contact with cloth-covered furniture or carpeted areas
 - Discourage residents from feeding food treats to animals. Animals should be discouraged from licking residents' skin. If an animal licks a resident, ensure the resident's skin is washed and hand hygiene is performed
 - Prohibit visits during an infectious disease outbreak at a facility until the outbreak is declared over

Hand hygiene

Hand hygiene is essential for all residents, staff, and animal handlers. Proper hand hygiene should be performed both before and after contact with animals. Facilities should ensure handwashing stations are located near where animals are being handled, and that there is an adequate supply of liquid soap with paper towels or alcohol-based hand sanitizer stations.

Caring and feeding of animals

Facilities should have a pet care plan which identifies who is responsible for the animal's daily requirements (feeding, exercise, cage/litter box cleaning), daily health screening, bathing, grooming, nail trimming and where in the facility the animal is allowed to go.

In addition to the above, the items below should also be considered:

Health Status Documentation	Facilities must be able to produce documentation verifying that mammals (dogs, cats) have had annual veterinarian check-ups, rabies vaccinations are up to date and are healthy
Veterinary Contact	The veterinarian's contact information and health records should be included and readily available to staff in case of a bite or animal illness
Plan of Care for a Sick Animal	A sick animal should be promptly removed from the facility (i.e., if it has vomiting or diarrhea episodes, sneezes, or coughs for unknown reasons, displays unusual or stressful behaviours, or the illness is suspected to be infectious in origin). Animals may return to the facility after symptoms have resolved
Bird Considerations	Birds must always be kept in a cage and should have their wings clipped to limit flight/movement to control bird droppings
Pet Feeding	Animals should be fed only commercially prepared food and treats. Live insects and animals, raw meat and poultry should not be fed to animals to avoid the spread of infectious diseases
Pet Food Storage	Animal food containers and food bags should not be stored on the floor or in areas where human food is stored, prepared, or served
Pet Water Source	Animals should have access to fresh, clean water and must not be allowed to drink out of toilets
Pet Bathing	Animals should be bathed in a utility sink when they are visibly soiled. Animals must not be bathed in a sink used for food or water

Cleaning surfaces contaminated by animals in the home

- Environmental surfaces (e.g., floors, counters, seats, etc.) contaminated by animal blood and/or other substances such as urine, feces, vomit and saliva must be cleaned and disinfected by staff wearing gloves and other personal protective equipment as required
 - Conduct a [point of care risk assessment](#) to determine PPE required if there will be blood/body fluid exposure
- Gross surface contamination should be removed with paper towels and disposed of in the garbage
- The surface should be cleaned with soap and water and then a disinfectant should be applied and used according to manufacturers' instructions
- Allow product to remain wet on the surface for the required contact time
- Disinfectant should have a drug identification number (DIN) and should not be expired

Cleaning animal dwellings

- Residents should not be in close proximity during the cleaning of animal dwellings and should not be involved in cleaning and disinfecting animal dwellings
- Designated facility staff should clean cages, dog beds, litter boxes, fish tanks, bird cages and other animal dwellings regularly and document the activity

- Staff who clean animal dwellings should not provide direct resident care. If so, staff should wear personal protective equipment, change clothes, and perform proper hand hygiene after cleaning the animal dwelling and prior to interacting with residents
- Surfaces contaminated by animal urine, feces, vomit and/or blood must be cleaned and disinfected by staff wearing gloves and personal protective equipment as required
- Gross surface contamination of the dwelling should be removed with paper towels and disposed of in the garbage. The surface should then be cleaned with soap and water and then a disinfectant should be applied and used according to manufacturers' instructions.
- Disinfectant should have a drug identification number (DIN), contact time and should not be expired
- Once the disinfectant has dried, the animal dwelling surface is to be rinsed to ensure no harmful chemical residue is left on the surface. (See the [Pet Care – Cage and Crate Cleaning Instruction poster](#))
- Sinks used for resident food preparation or obtaining drinking water must not be used for cleaning animal items. Utility sinks should be used for cleaning animal enclosures and related items
- Additional cleaning and disinfecting precautions should be taken when cleaning and disinfecting bird cages, fish tanks and litter boxes. Ensure there are staff resources to provide this additional duty of animal care
 - Bird cages should be cleaned and disinfected on a regular basis to ensure fecal matter does not dry up, accumulate, and become airborne. Reduce the risk of psittacosis, a respiratory disease which is spread to humans when they inhale dust from dried bird droppings, bird secretions and feathers of infected birds. Staff cleaning bird cages should wear an N95 face mask when there is a risk that airborne dust and particulate will be generated
 - Litter boxes should be cleaned daily, using gloves and a scoop to remove clumps formed from urine or feces. Pregnant staff should not clean or handle the litter box due to the risk of acquiring a toxoplasmosis infection

Cleaning and disinfecting animal enclosures – Sample Procedure

Facility operators are encouraged to post written procedures and/or a poster to remind staff of proper cleaning and disinfecting procedures.

1. Prepare to clean

- Wash hands and put on gloves and other protective equipment, as needed
- Follow extra precautions for cleaning bird cages (i.e., wear a surgical mask) and keep residents away from cage cleaning area

2. Clean pet items and cage

- Remove pets, bedding, toys, food, and water dishes from the cage
- Dispose of food, droppings, and bedding material in a garbage bag (pregnant staff should not handle litter boxes)
- Clean bowls, toys, and cage surfaces in a utility sink. Do not use kitchen sinks. Use soap and a scrub brush and then rinse with water
- Wash and dry bedding and towels

3. Disinfect pet items and cage

- Apply disinfectant* to surfaces/items that have been cleaned
- Rinse disinfected surfaces/items and dry them
- Clean and disinfect cleaning sink
- Remove gloves and wash hands

4. Re-make your pet's home

- Add new food and fresh water to cleaned bowls
- Return clean bedding and toys to cage
- Complete the pet cleaning log and schedule next cleaning

*The disinfectant chosen should be suitable for use on surfaces or objects in animal dwellings and should have a drug identification number (DIN). Follow manufacturer's instructions for mixing, contact time and application. If bleach is used, please refer to York Region's [Proper Cleaning and Disinfection Practices](#) for low level disinfection. Bleach should remain wet on the surface for ten minutes.

Refer to [Pet Care – Cage and Crate Cleaning Poster](#)

Incidents with animals

- If a resident or staff member is exposed to the saliva of an animal through a bite or scratch, animal supervisors must immediately remove the animal from the facility and inform facility staff
- Facility staff should ensure that the affected area is washed with soap and water and medical attention should be sought
- The facility is responsible for documenting the incident including details and the first aid practices followed
- The facility should inform the resident's family member(s) about the incident
- **Facilities must report all incidents of animal bites and scratches (where exposure to the animal's saliva is a possibility) to York Region Public Health:**
 - Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.: 1-800-361-5653; TYY 1-866-512-6228
 - Report online: Complete the [online form](#)
 - Fax: Complete the [Animal Exposure Incident Report](#) and fax the form to 905-898-8277
 - If you are reporting after 4:30 p.m. on Weekdays, Weekends or Holidays: Call 1-888-335-0111

This material is provided by York Region Public Health. Please visit [york.ca](#) or call Health Connection at 1-866-361-5653 TYY 1-866-512-6228.

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