

Living with Covid-19: Companion Animal Veterinary Practice 2020-2021

Recognising the particularly large degree of close personal interaction that occurs in waiting and consulting rooms in their sector, companion animal veterinary practices have adopted specific measures to reduce the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission at their premises whilst providing an emergency and urgent-care service.

Physical Distancing Protocols

Protocols to eliminate public-to-public contact and minimise public-to-veterinary staff contact at veterinary premises are now in place across the state. (See Annex A).

These protocols, with local modification where deemed appropriate and safe, shall be kept in place until such time as there is complete suppression of Covid-19 in the population.

Reduction in companion animals seen at veterinary premises

Practices have been operating on a 'emergency and urgent cases only' basis since mid-March 2020.

A veterinary practitioner assesses each individual case and makes a decision if an animal can be treated remotely or must be seen or, for preventative healthcare or other non-urgent investigative or surgical procedures, if the visit or procedure can be safely postponed and if so for how long.

Whilst some would have been performed on a case-by-cases basis (e.g. neutering outdoor cats, vaccinating puppies, neutering if there is an entire male and female of the same species in the same house, etc), the vast majority of preventative healthcare and non-urgent investigations or procedures that would ordinarily have been performed since February have been postponed and remain outstanding.

As Ireland enters a new phase of living with SARS-CoV-2 for the foreseeable future, and recognising that the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission at companion animal veterinary premises has been minimised by the adoption of the above measures, the profession must assess how and when to safely resume provision of comprehensive veterinary care for companion animals and performance of necessary postponed procedures.

Prolonged postponement of these necessary procedures will have a deleterious effect on the health and welfare of these animals. In addition, there is a significant risk that situations will arise whereby 1) un-neutered animals breed without check resulting in population control failure, and 2) infectious diseases that are currently well controlled by vaccination become widespread once again. Increased cases of canine leptospirosis due to fall off in the annual vaccination required for this disease also has public health implications that must be considered.

An unintended consequence of a prolonged postponement of preventive healthcare and other necessary but non-urgent procedures is a potential significant increase in demand for veterinary services due to increasing numbers of animals presenting with preventable conditions. This uncontrolled scenario poses a Covid-19 risk.

Veterinary practices operating physical distancing protocols as per Annex A pose low risk of Covid-19 transmission. Currently there is capacity to see small numbers of additional patients with minimal additional risk, and practices can thus safely and methodically work their way through the backlog of preventative healthcare procedures that exists. This will not be the case if these procedures are postponed for a further prolonged period. At that point practices will not have the capacity to safely provide an urgent and emergency care service (with increased numbers of those presenting due to fall off in preventative healthcare) whilst also trying to catch up on an ever increasing volume of preventative health care procedures. Risk to veterinary staff and to animal health and welfare from such a spike in demand outstripping the capacity of practices to cope can be managed by using current capacity to recommence performing small numbers of these procedures in a safe and controlled manner.

Accordingly, as Ireland moves to the 'new normal' that will exist until Covid-19 is completely suppressed, the assessment is that, provided the Covid-19 situation continues to stabilise, preventative healthcare procedures can safely recommence in a controlled and staged manner in the coming weeks. Each veterinary practice must however assess their own situation, decide on their own policy and plan accordingly. If there are further waves of Covid-19 infection in the community, care must revert to the 'urgent and emergency cases only' position.

Staged return to performing preventative healthcare procedures

It is advised that practices carefully manage their preventative healthcare workload over the coming months to avoid a peak of demand. It is advised to plan now to 'flatten the curve' of demand so that a situation does not arise whereby capacity to do emergency and urgent work along with preventative healthcare as it falls due is overwhelmed due to a large spike in 'overdue' animals presenting for postponed procedures.

Two options are available: Working from the longest overdue forwards 1) send small batches of reminders to clients the usual way and let them contact the practice to make an appointment or 2) contact each client individually and arrange an appointment for them. Each practice can decide what works best for them.

For example, a practice may decide to contact owners of animals whose due date for their postponed procedures were prior to March and do these initially. Once these are completed then move to contact those who were due in 1st half of March and, once these are completed, then contact those due in 2nd half of March and so on until we a situation arises where procedures can be performed as they fall due later this summer. The smaller a batch being contacted at one time will allow more controlled management of visits.

To prevent a peak of phone queries and client aggravation, clients need to understand that a backlog is being worked through and their turn will come in due course. Whatever plan a practice feels will work for their circumstance should be communicated to their clients in advance so that people will understand the plan and will know to wait until their turn is called.

Clients should be told to contact their practice if they have a concern that the procedure should be performed earlier for whatever reason (e.g. un-neutered male and female animal of the same species in the same house, outdoor un-neutered cat) – in these cases the veterinary staff can make a case by case decision.

A suggested text for client communication – email, social media, website – is below:

During the initial phase of Covid-19, and where it was felt safe for the animal in question to do so, veterinary practices postponed performing vaccinations, neuterings and other necessary but non-urgent procedures.

Now that we enter the new phase of living with Covid-19 these procedures will recommence over the coming period in a controlled and safe manner so as to minimise risk to our staff, our clients and the public.

There is a backlog and over the next period we will be working though this in a manner to ensure our capacity to do these whilst also safely catering for emergency and urgent cases is not overwhelmed.

We will contact you over the coming several weeks to invite your pet in for an appointment. Can we please ask that you wait until you receive this communication but if you have an emergency or if you feel your pet needs to be seen sooner please do contact us.

The rules the veterinary profession has already put in place regarding visits to the practice will remain in place:

1. Before you and/or your pet comes to us you must tell us if you, anyone in your household or anyone you are in contact with has been diagnosed with or is awaiting a test for or showing any symptoms of COVID-19 or is self-isolating.
2. All visits are by appointment only – do not come to the practice for anything without calling first. When you arrive for your appointment call us from your car and follow our instructions.
3. In most circumstances we will take your pet from you and drop them back to you. The vet will discuss everything with you in a manner where physical distancing is adhered to. Please pay by card or EFT.
4. If you are invited into the premises, only one healthy adult may accompany a pet. We love having children accompany their pets but not at this time please. You must disinfect your hands on entry and keep 2m distant.
5. If you require pet food or repeat medications, please call us to place your order 24 hours in advance. We will take payment over the telephone and advise you when they will be ready for collection. When you arrive to collect these please call us and we will drop them to your car or meet you at the door.

Annex A: COVID-19 advisory to RVPs & RVNs regarding operation of Companion Animal practices

Each practice will have appointed a Covid-19 Lead Veterinary Practitioner and it is that person who can and must use their professional judgement to decide what measures will work in their own practice whilst constantly re-assessing the evolving situation nationally, locally and in their practice and make decisions as necessary in real-time.

These measures are to be adopted until there is complete suppression of SARS-CoV-2 in Ireland.

1. Reduce public-to-public and public-to-veterinary staff interaction by at best eliminating but otherwise minimising entry of members of the public to the practice premises. If the public are permitted ensure that personal distancing and hand-hygiene is adhered to at all times. Only one adult to accompany an animal.
2. Keep the premises door closed with an appropriate sign on it advising clients to call the practice for advice and if they need items from the shop/pharmacy they are to be ordered/paid by phone and will be dropped to them at the door or to their car.
3. Inform client base by usual means (email, text, social media, website):
 - To not come to the practice for anything without calling first
 - That all food and repeat medications are to be ordered / pre-paid for by telephone and collected at the door of the premises / dropped to their car
 - That all consultations, procedures and visits to the premises are by appointment only
4. Examine if it is possible to arrange for food and medications to be delivered to the households of people advised to cocoon or self-isolate.

Before examining and/or admitting an animal ask the client:

“Have you, anyone in your household or anyone you are in contact with been diagnosed with or is awaiting a test for or showing any symptoms of COVID-19 or self-isolating”?

For visits of animals owned by non-affected clients:

- Clients should be informed when making the appointment to wait in their car and telephone on arrival.
- Animals should be collected from outside and should be examined away from the owner. If necessary, one person may enter but must perform hand hygiene on entry and exit and adhere to personal distancing.
- After examination, treatment plans should be discussed and agreed by phone or at car, always adhering to personal distancing measures.
- Following examination of an animal, clean and disinfect surfaces and equipment and all staff assisting with the examination should perform hand hygiene from hands to elbow.

For calls from affected clients:

- Make arrangements to do all possible to treat the animal remotely until the client's isolation period elapses but, if it the veterinary practitioner deems that the animal absolutely needs to be seen, that it is brought to the practice by **someone other than the affected person(s) or members of their household** and that staff don appropriate PPE and follow correct procedure for donning and doffing of PPE.
- Consider fomite transmission: It is possible that the animal could be harbouring virus on its coat or respiratory/GI tracts. Furthermore, whilst there has been no evidence of transmission from cats to humans, it is now suspected that cats may rarely become infected with SARS-CoV-2. Accordingly, it is vital that all of this be considered before making a decision to see an animal from an affected household.