

# COVID-19 and Veterinary Practice

## Update January 2021



In relation to COVID-19 there has been no government advisory relating *specifically* to veterinary practices, nor will there be. As medical professionals with extensive knowledge and experience of disease transmission and control we are able and expected to make appropriate local decisions to mitigate risk in our own practices.

It has been, and remains, the case that each practice can and indeed must make an individual risk assessment, taking into account a wide range of factors relating to their staff levels, their location, their clientele and their practice design and size as well as the national and local COVID-19 situation, and set their own protocols accordingly. [Ireland's COVID-19 Data Hub](#) is a very useful resource to ascertain the local prevalence of COVID-19 cases. <https://covid19ireland-geohive.hub.arcgis.com/>.

Veterinary Practices are also reminded to review their occupational health and safety risk assessments to take account of any changes to the work activity that may arise following implementation of the Public Health recommendations. For specific COVID-19 advice for employers and employees from the Health and Safety Authority click [here \(HSA\)](#) (short URL: t.ly/l8Pz) and for advice from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre click [here \(HPSC\)](#) (short URL: t.ly/qSyt)

### **Biosecurity protocols and client/caseload management**

Regarding **Food Animal and Equine Practice** it was recognised that personal distancing on farms and equine premises is far easier to achieve than in companion animal practices. This, allied to working outdoor, presented those working in these areas of practice a more manageable risk of exposure to SARS-CoV-2. As such, during the pandemic, Food Animal and Equine practice continued to be able to offer as close to normal as a service as possible, albeit with modified working practices on farm and equine premises. As we enter into the busy spring season Veterinary Ireland will be issuing a press release and will in addition communicate to national stakeholder organisations in these regards. The press release to be issued is included as *Annex A* to this document.

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, **Companion Animal Practice**, recognising the very high degree of personal interaction in waiting and consulting rooms, reverted to offering an emergency and urgent care service and put in place strict biosecurity measures to minimise the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission at these veterinary premises.

The 29th April 2020 advisory issued by Veterinary Ireland discussed the recommencement of non-urgent 'routine' preventative healthcare procedures (vaccination, neutering, dentals, *etc.*) during May 2020. Most practices felt comfortable recommencing these procedures from May 2020 and in general practices have continued offering full services, in as close to normal a manner as possible, since then.

It was advised in May 2020 to consider continuing adhering to the initial biosecurity measures introduced in March, in particular the operation of the 'closed door' policy (*i.e.* taking animals in at the door, dispensing medications and pet foods to the client at the door/their car, *etc.*). Many practices have continued to operate in this manner and plan to do so until the pandemic is controlled by widespread rollout of COVID-19 vaccination. Any practice doing so will benefit from the full support of Veterinary Ireland if they face any negative comment from a member of the public in relation to the inconvenience this may cause to them.

However, having performed a risk assessment of their own circumstances, many practices concluded the risk of admitting clients for consultations, under very strict protocols, was acceptable. In these cases the advice is that all measures are taken to minimise close interactions in the building (*i.e.* client-client contact in the waiting room, client-staff contact in the consultation room). The usual flow of clients (waiting room -> consultation room -> waiting room/desk to pay) is best amended to avoid public mixing in the waiting room. A new flow *could* be: Wait in car -> directly to consultation room -> animal back to car -> client back in to desk to collect medications and pay. This is just an example of what *may* work: Every practice has their own design and layout so it is up to each practice to decide what flow and protocol will work best for them. For example a practice with a large waiting room and multiple consultation rooms may be comfortable having a very limited number of persons in a well ventilated waiting room waiting to be called into the consultation room. This is a decision each practice has to make for themselves.

If members of the public are admitted to veterinary practice premises, then of course only one person should be admitted and those persons should be required to wear faces masks. Be aware that if a member of public is admitted and subsequently tests positive for COVID-19 it is possible that the staff members they interacted with may be deemed close-contacts and may be required to restrict their movements for a period. This risk must be factored into any decision making process regarding the admittance of clients to a practice premises and what protocols to follow when they are on the premises.

An example of such a protocol to permit entry to clients to a practice premises could be:

1. **All visits strictly by appointment and the client waits in their car until their turn.**
2. **Only one healthy adult may accompany the animal into the building.**
3. **The client must don a face mask before entry and must perform hand hygiene on entry to the practice.**
4. **The client is directed to the consultation room and asked to take a seat or to stand at the far end of the room from the staff (Note: a sitting person will be less inclined to unintentionally move forward).**
5. **Having taken a history, the animal is examined by the veterinary practitioner assisted by a member of staff (not the client) restraining the animal. This can take place in the in the consultation room or in another part of the practice as may be appropriate.**
6. **Medications can be dispensed and payment can be taken in the consult room (or, to free up consult room capacity, the client can take the animal back to the car and then return to pay and collect medications at the desk).**

This is an *example* rather than a set of strict guidelines and may be amended as per a practice's own individual risk assessment. Whatever protocol is decided on it should be communicated to your clients and an appropriate sign should be placed at the entrance to the building. An example of such a sign accompanies this circular as *Annex B*.

### **Staff biosecurity protocols**

At the outset of the pandemic many practices began splitting their teams and/or required all staff to wear full PPE at all times. As time has progressed this has in general not proved sustainable in the long term and veterinary practices have, in the main, reverted to close to normal working practices.

Excepting a member of staff is diagnosed with COVID-19 (in which case the specific advice of the health authorities must be followed), there is no specific advisory on what approach a practice must take. It is up to each practice to make their own decision taking all factors into account, having performed their own risk assessment.

Notwithstanding this it is advised, until the pandemic is controlled by rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination, that staff:

1. Wear face masks when in a practice premises or whilst interacting with clients outdoor,
2. Practice hand hygiene between animals, and
3. Remain at home and inform their employer should they be a close contact or have symptoms consistent with COVID-19.

In conclusion, it is important to understand that this document is not meant as a set of 'rules' that a practice is obliged to follow. Merely this is an advisory so that each practice may make ongoing risk assessments and amend (or not) their protocols accordingly to reflect the current situation and the practice's ability to provide a viable service in the medium to long term.

## Annex A: COVID-19 press release – food animal and equine practice – spring 2021

Veterinary professionals have worked tirelessly and in line with the government's advice to look after the health and welfare of the nation's animals, and to try and keep their teams, clients and themselves safe. Spring 2020 when this pandemic first emerged little was known about the disease. Now 12 months later we are facing into the busy spring period once again. Infection rates around in the community remain high, therefore it is important that all those working with animals, be it farm livestock, equines or companion animals remain vigilant.

Although veterinary professionals and practices continue to provide as full a range of services as possible, it is essential that the way in which we work is provided in a manner that supports social/physical distancing and good hygiene and biosecurity.

Vets when visiting farms, studs, racing yards etc are always aware of biosecurity measures to avoid the introduction and spread of disease between premises, now more than ever the human health aspect of that is of great importance.

When a vet is to visit your premises, either for routine calls or emergencies, please remember to do your part to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

- At all times please be sure to adhere to the instructions and advice given by your vet be that general advice given by the practice or specific advice for the vet's visit to your premises.
- Try to have animals ready in a holding area to minimise the amount of time that people need to be in contact.
- Appropriate PPE and in particular **a facemask must be worn** especially when close contact is unavoidable and when people are present on farms, yards etc for prolonged duration, even when outdoors.
- Remember to socially distance: An adult cow or horse, nose to tail, is a good measure of an appropriate distance that should be maintained at all times.
- Elderly and vulnerable clients should make arrangements to have help on site to avoid putting themselves at risk.
- If you or a member of your household is isolating, restricting your movements or awaiting a test result, inform your practice at the time of placing the call. That way a safe solution can be organised. For cattle clients the Department of Agriculture have protocols in place to allow for the deferment of TB tests in these circumstances.

Recognising the high degree of close personal interaction in the veterinary practice premises, measures were put in place in these practices at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic to keep the public and practice staff as safe as possible. Please follow your practices guidelines. Waiting times at practice premises may be longer but these measures are in the interest of the health and safety of our clients and staff alike.

The veterinary workforce is busy at this time of year looking after our clients and their animals. A sick vet means no vet and no vet means your animals cannot be cared for when needed. By maintaining these safety measures, we can work together for a spring where your vet can continue to care for your animals at as close to full capacity as possible and where you and your family are kept safe and healthy whilst we await the full rollout of the vaccine that will free us from this pandemic.