

Herd Health for Shelters and Rescues

By Dr. Karen Dashfield, DVM



→ Did you know? Disease control programs not only reduce disease and suffering in the animals in your care, but also reduce overall shelter expenses and average length of stay while increasing adoptability, staff and employee morale, and overall lives saved. Regardless of the size or budget of your sheltering organization, you can develop an effective disease control program by using and adapting the resources you already have.



WHAT IS HERD HEALTH?

Herd health is an overall program designed to maintain the health of the animals in your care through recognition of the effect that each individual's health has on the health of the whole population. The two basic philosophies of herd health programs are:

- 1 One sick animal can trigger a disease outbreak.
- 2 An immunized group of animals can resist an outbreak.

Tips on Building Your Herd Health Program

No. 1

Develop proper intake procedures to minimize diseases introduced into your facility.

Basic examinations should be performed on all animals to determine their overall health, recognize animals in need of veterinary care, and separate potentially contagious animals.

Bathing animals with a flea and tick shampoo upon intake can remove surface germs and ensure that animals are free from external parasites such as fleas and lice.

Vaccination immediately upon entry helps to ensure that the overall shelter population has immunity against diseases common to shelters. Modified live virus vaccines can provide adequate immunity to many diseases in as few as 3 days. Your shelter veterinarian can help you select vaccinations appropriate for your region.

Worming of animals upon intake will minimize the shedding of parasite eggs into animal housing areas, dog walk areas, and common play yards.

Quarantine of animals entering your facility from other rescue facilities or high-disease-risk locations like puppy mill rescues or hoarding situations away from your pre-existing population helps minimize the risk of introducing new diseases.



No. 2

Immediate isolation of potentially contagious animals prevents a single sick animal from turning into an outbreak of disease.

Physical isolation in a separate room with a separate air system is ideal, but you can create a virtual isolation space using shower curtains or other barriers if you do not have a physical isolation room.

Procedures are a second layer of protection in isolating contagious animals. Washing your hands, changing your clothes, and disinfecting the bottom of your shoes after handling a contagious animal prevents the spread of disease through the facility.

Ideally, wash all dishes and linens from the isolation area separately and return them to the isolation area, or use disposable products. Where separate washing facilities do not exist, wash the dishes and linens separately and after those from the rest of the facility.

No. 3

Cleaning and disinfecting properly and regularly can help prevent the spread of disease.

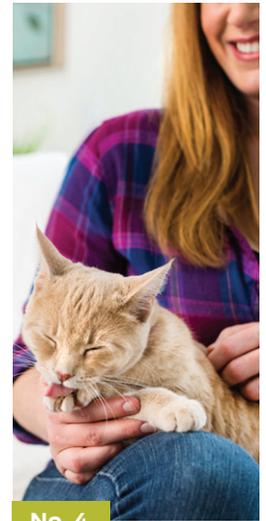
Don't forget that some animals can shed viral infections while not being clinically ill, so it is important to practice herd health procedures throughout the shelter.

Use disinfectant and cleaners appropriate for shelter use, use them at the proper concentration for your purposes, and allow the recommended contact time before rinsing. Even the best cleaners and disinfectants won't work if used improperly.

Stop and think about daily tasks that may spread diseases. If you scoop cat litter boxes with a single scoop, you are likely spreading parasites like coccidia through your cats. Unfortunately, a quick dip in a disinfectant bucket or spray with disinfectant isn't adequate. Most disinfectants require a minimum of 5-10 minutes of contact time. Consider a complete, daily change of litter for high-risk animals and kittens instead of scooping.

Include a disinfecting step when washing water and food dishes. Dish soap alone will not kill many of the hardier viruses, like parvovirus.

Check your shelter for other potential sources of disease spread, such as grooming equipment, communal water dishes, kennel leads, or communal play yards, and develop protocols to minimize the risk of disease spread.



No. 4

Work with a veterinarian interested in shelter medicine.

While you can do a lot to keep your animals healthy, having a veterinarian who understands the herd health concept will greatly help you to develop your disease control plans, investigate disease outbreaks, and treat any sick animals that come into your care.

Remember, you can never prevent all the animals in your care from becoming ill, but you can minimize the impact that contagious animals have on the rest of the animals in your care, protecting the overall health of your herd.



***Karen Dashfield** is a shelter veterinarian with 25 years of experience designing disease control programs for shelters, kennels, and wildlife rehabilitators throughout New Jersey. She is the Supervising Veterinarian for the Jefferson Township Municipal Pound and BARKS (Byram Animal Rescue Kindness Squad). Through her Veterinary House Call practice, she provides consultation and animal care for numerous shelters and rescues. She has served as a Volunteer Medical Director for the Best Friends Animal Society NY Super Adoptions since 2010. She prepares future animal control officers, shelter workers, and wildlife rehabilitators through her teaching for Career Development Institute, and at local and regional conferences. Dr. Karen shares her home with her dogs, Tad, Delilah, Sadie and Pollywog, and a cat named Princess.*