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ZOONOSES

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Not every pet owner knows what zoonotic diseases are, but they should. A zoonotic disease is a disease that is transmitted between human and animals but usually refers to a disease transmitted from animal to human. Zoonoses are of great concern to veterinarians as we feel a responsibility to monitor the potential risk to our clients. There are over 200 zoonotic diseases identified, but the number common to our pet cats and dogs is much fewer. Zoonotic disease can be caused by viral, bacterial, fungal, and parasitic pathogens. Approximately three fourths of the new diseases that have affected humans over the past decade have been caused by pathogens originated from an animal product.*

Our pets can be a source of disease to us. Whether directly transmitting disease as in Leptospirosis or Ringworm or by arthropods like ticks and mosquitoes, as in Lyme or West Nile Virus. It can be by bites or scratches as in Rabies or Cat Scratch disease or even by ingestion or inhalation as in Giardia or Toxoplasmosis. Some people are more susceptible to these diseases than others. Elderly people, children, people with diseases that suppress the immune system like HIV and Lupus, and people on medications like chemotherapy drugs all can have immune systems that function at a lower level and are therefore more at risk.

Your veterinarian plays a vital role in preventing the spread of disease from your pet to your family members. Correctly diagnosing diseases and being knowledgeable about what diseases are potentially zoonotic is our job. Informing the pet owner of the risk and what measures can be taken to reduce the possibility of the spread of disease is also up to us. We can help manage prevention programs like routine vaccinations and parasite control. With potential human exposure, we can recognize disease states early and reduce potential human exposure. But it is important for the pet owner to be on the lookout for signs something isn't right. That mild cough in a dog or bout of diarrhea in a cat may be something to truly be concerned about for your own well-being. If your pet is sick, remember to ask your veterinarian if the disease is something you could catch also. If so, ask your veterinarian what steps you can take to reduce your risk of exposure. We have to know because we potentially get exposed every day.

* Sirois, Margi, EdD, MS, RVT, Transmission, Treatment, & Control of Common Zoonoses, ACVIM 2008