



Animals in Public Evacuation Centers

As persons are displaced from their homes into evacuation centers, they often wish to bring companion animals with them. Having a pet nearby may serve as a source of comfort to someone who has lost their possessions and, perhaps, family members. Unfortunately, many disaster evacuation centers (and specifically Red Cross evacuation centers) **cannot accept pets** because of states' health and safety regulations. Pets kept at human evacuation centers can sometimes pose a risk of disease or injury to other shelter inhabitants. In fact, service animals that assist people with disabilities are currently the **only** animals allowed in some evacuation centers.

Animal evacuation centers and foster homes may accommodate animals while owners reside in temporary evacuation centers, but these services may not be available everywhere. The following Questions and Answers were developed to address health and safety concerns regarding animals kept in non-Red Cross public evacuation centers.

Q: What are the potential health risks of housing animals and people in one location?

A: Close contact between humans and other animals in evacuation centers may pose a risk for injury or illness. Scared and stressed animals may be more likely to bite or scratch their owners, other people, or other pets. In addition to injury and potential infection from bites and scratches, bites from dogs, cats, and ferrets may present a risk for rabies. Serious bite wounds may require surgical repair. Furthermore, proper care of the animal, such as collection and disposal of urine and feces, may be difficult in public evacuation centers. This poses an additional risk of infection for people, particularly the immunocompromised. People may also be allergic to furred or feathered pets. These problems may be more serious when people do not have access to their usual medications.

Q: What are some diseases that may be transmitted by contact with pets?

A: Routine contact with dogs, and especially cats, may pose a risk for ringworm, which is a skin infection caused by a fungus. Animal feces and fecal-contaminated skin and fur may pose a risk of diarrheal illness from *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, and some intestinal parasites. Although these risks are usually small, in the wake of natural disasters such as hurricane Katrina, physical stress and exposure to floodwaters and contaminated food and water may increase the risk for diarrheal infections. Most reptiles (lizards, snakes, iguanas, turtles) shed [*Salmonella*](#) in their feces; children younger than 5 years old are at high risk for this disease if they handle reptiles. Although people usually acquire toxoplasmosis by ingesting meat containing tissue cysts, young cats may rarely shed *Toxoplasma* oocysts in their stool. Prompt removal of stool from the environment minimizes this risk. Some pet rodents, such as hamsters, gerbils, and guinea pigs, can transmit lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus (LCMV). *Toxoplasma* and LCMV can cause birth defects in an unborn child if a pregnant woman becomes infected.

Q: What are the risks associated with animal bites?

A: The consequences of animal bites, especially dog bites, can be serious. The risk of a bite injury may be greater in situations that promote close contact between people and unfamiliar animals. **Bites from dogs, cats, or ferrets carry a risk for rabies**, even if the animal has been vaccinated and appears healthy. If a dog, cat, or ferret bites a person or another animal, they must be confined and observed for 10 days to see whether they develop signs of rabies. If the biting animal shows signs of rabies or cannot be reliably confined and observed, that animal must be euthanized and tested for rabies. **Serious bite wounds require medical care, and surgical repair in some cases.** Animal bites may also result in infection, and the injured person may need to be treated with antibiotics, a tetanus booster or receive other medical care.

Q: What are some other less common health risks associated with pets?

A: Dogs and cats may serve as a source of ticks that could bite humans and cause disease. Depending on the type of tick, Lyme disease, [Rocky Mountain spotted fever](#), or ehrlichiosis may be of concern, although pets themselves cannot transmit these diseases to people. Cats may spread [cat scratch disease \(bartonellosis\)](#) through bites or scratches. Bites from pet rats may transmit a disease called rat bite fever. Exposure to infected birds may lead to [psittacosis](#), a bacterial infection that causes pneumonia. For this reason, it is often best to also house pet birds, especially parakeets, parrots, love birds, and canaries, away from the general shelter population.

Q: What can be done to minimize the health risks of pets in human evacuation centers?

A: The following guidelines may help reduce risk of injury or disease if it is necessary to house pets in a public shelter:

- The appropriateness of housing pets in public evacuation centers should be carefully considered. Sometimes separate areas can be established for pets. If this is done, then these areas should be staffed with animal care personnel who have been trained in the handling of animals as well as appropriate approaches to infection control. Animal evacuation centers or foster homes may be good alternatives.
- If a pet is kept at a human shelter, it should not be allowed to freely roam the facility and should be kept under control at all times, either via caging or a leash. This is for the animal's safety, as well as that of the people living in the shelter.
- All dogs, cats, and ferrets must have proof of current vaccination against rabies, or be vaccinated upon entry to the shelter.
- Dogs and cats should be treated for intestinal parasites while staying at the human shelter. This is particularly important when the pet is younger than 6 months old.
- Dogs and cats should be treated with medications to kill fleas and ticks. In doing so, care should be taken to administer treatments that are safe for that particular species of animal (i.e., not all treatments that are safe for dogs are safe for cats).
- Furred or feathered pets should be housed in areas separate from people with allergies or asthma triggered by fur, feathers, or dander.
- Cats should be kept in a cage with a litter box that is cleaned frequently (at least once every 24 hours). Pregnant women or immunocompromised people should not have contact with used litter.

Animals in Public Shelters

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- Dogs should be walked regularly on a leash outside of the shelter to allow them to urinate and defecate in designated areas, and any feces should be immediately collected and disposed of.
- Anyone bitten by an animal should speak with a healthcare provider to discuss associated concerns (e.g., tissue trauma, infection, rabies risk). Bites and scratches should be thoroughly cleaned with soap and water. Arrangements should be made to confine and observe a biting dog, cat, or ferret for a period of 10 days.
- People caring for pets in evacuation centers should practice good hygiene by cleaning up after their pets (e.g., disposal of feces) and frequently washing their hands.
- Children younger than 5 years old should not handle [reptiles](#) without adult supervision, and should always wash their hands after doing so. Hand washing should be monitored by an adult.
- Pregnant women and immunocompromised people should avoid contact with cat feces, and with pet rodents such as hamsters, gerbils, and guinea pigs.
- People should not share food with their pets, nor allow pets to lick their faces.

For more information on the value of pets, and on keeping people and pets healthy, please visit

CDC Healthy Pets Healthy People
American Veterinary Medical Association

www.cdc.gov/healthypets/
www.avma.org

For more information, visit www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters,
or call CDC at 800-CDC-INFO (English and Spanish) or 888-232-6348 (TTY).

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