

Minimizing zoonotic disease risk when caring for community cats

Dr. Hurley addresses zoonotic disease concerns when caring for community cats.

Question:

Hi - For years my neighbor had been putting food out for a handful of feral cats in the alley behind our houses, but she recently was admitted to a long-term nursing care facility and left the cats behind. I'm a cat lover (I have two of my own), so I don't want to bring them in to the shelter where I've heard they might be euthanized. However, I'm also a public health nurse and I'm aware that feral cats can spread disease to humans. It's a particular concern because I live in Los Angeles where human cases of typhus, spread by cat fleas as you probably know, have been on the rise. In fact, there was just an article about this in the paper recently. If the cats were friendly I would just take them into my own vet and get them checked out, vaccinated and started on flea control like my own two, but I can't even get close enough to touch them. What do you advise?

- Concerned neighbor

Answer:

Thanks for your question and for your concern about the cats in your neighborhood. While the diseases carried by community cats and their fleas can also be found in pet cats and often in other animals in the environment, it's important not to disregard or minimize the risk to human health that can be associated with the presence of feral cats, especially in poorly managed colonies. Fortunately, sensible practices can greatly reduce these risks. The same measures that are recommended to reduce zoonotic disease risk will often go a long way to reducing nuisance concerns and complaints as well as benefitting the cats themselves, so taking this seriously has the potential to be a win/win situation on all sides. Here are some specific guidelines we hope you will find helpful:

1. **Spay/neuter/vaccinate.** This is the single most important step you can take: *if you are going to feed cats, you must make every effort to trap the cats and have them sterilized.* Sometimes called Trap/Neuter/Return or TNR, this is crucial to reduce zoonotic disease risk for several reasons:
 - Most obviously, spay/neuter will limit growth in the number of cats present. Most cases where zoonotic disease transmission from feral cats has been suspected or confirmed are associated with relatively large colonies or groups of cats, not just one or two cats in someone's back yard – but a couple of cats can quickly grow to a problematic number without spay/neuter intervention.
 - Juveniles are more likely to shed some zoonotic pathogens such as toxocariasis (roundworm), ancylostomiasis (hookworm), and toxoplasmosis; spay/neuter reduces this risk by reducing the number of young cats present. For instance, toxoplasmosis shedding was found to be lower in managed free roaming cats versus unmanaged cats.
 - Sterilization also improves individual cat health and reduces disease transmission between cats – even if the disease is not zoonotic, in general the immune system of healthy cats will be better able to keep disease in check and reduce the amount of spread into the environment.
 - Sterilization and consistent feeding as described below will tend to reduce the distance that cats roam, which in turn is important to reduce spread of disease between neighborhoods as well as to decrease nuisance behaviors and complaints by neighbors.
 - Vaccination for rabies as well as feline panleukopenia/herpesvirus/calicivirus (FVRCP) can be administered when the cat is under anesthesia for spay/neuter surgery. A single rabies vaccine has been shown to protect from infection for 3-4 years.
2. **Feed responsibly,** and only enough for the cats you've identified as needing care. Putting out excess food can

attract additional cats or other animals such as opossums, racoons and rats that potentially pose an even greater zoonotic disease risk.

- Feed only as much as the cats can eat in half an hour or less. Remove all uneaten food after half an hour.
- Keep the feeding area clean and in one maintained location
- Feed at a consistent time of day so you can identify which cats are present, notice any newcomers and take needed action (such as TNR) and identify any health concerns or other issues
- Feed on an elevated surface to limit access by other animals

3. **Limit flea infestation to the extent possible.** While eliminating all fleas on feral cats on an ongoing basis is likely unrealistic, there are steps that can be taken to reduce infestation levels.

- Malnourished, sickly cats and those that fail to groom (e.g. due to a matted hair coat or oral disease) are more likely to be heavily infested. Therefore, spay/neuter, responsible feeding and other measures to maintain general cat health may have some benefit in limiting flea numbers.
- At the time of TNR, a long-acting topical flea control product can be applied while the cats are under anesthesia.
- Treat shelters and/or bedding at least twice a year and as needed with a cat-safe environmental flea control product.
- In some cases, oral medication can be administered in food to individual cats for short term (e.g. Capstar) and long term (e.g. Lufenuron) flea control. However, when multiple cats are fed, dosing can be a problem.
- Most importantly, avoid practices such as excess feeding that attract other animals to the area. Although cat fleas have been implicated in human cases of typhus, cats are not the only animal to carry

this flea. Opossums, rats and other animals can also carry these and other fleas that can transmit typhus and other flea-borne diseases.

4. **Control feces.** In addition to being a potential source of zoonotic disease, cat feces in other people's yards is a common and understandable complaint. Outdoor litter boxes placed in strategic locations can encourage the cats to defecate in a contained area, making for better neighbor relations as well as better public health. Instructions for these can be found online, for instance at <https://www.alleycat.org/community-cat-care/providing-outdoor-litter-boxes/>.
5. **Keep the environment clean.** As noted above, other urban wildlife can be attracted to leftover food and trash and can pose a greater risk than the cats themselves, both for flea-borne illness as well as other serious or even potentially fatal zoonotic conditions. For instance, some cases of human typhus have been associated with rat infestations at homeless encampments. Pick up trash and wash dishes and bedding as needed to avoid attracting insects, rats and other pests.
6. **Find homes for friendly kittens and spay/neuter any new adults that show up.** Putting out food for cats can attract additional feline visitors. Some of these may be your neighbor's pets - you can post "found" cats on social media and neighborhood network sites and talk to your neighbors to identify cats that already have an owner. Avoid feeding new cats that show up in good body condition, as this will reduce the likelihood that they will go home to the people that already care for them. However, if you can't find the owner of a newly arrived cat, make sure that the cat gets spayed/neutered and vaccinated, and rehome friendly cats and kittens to reduce the number of cats present over time.
7. **Maintain current vaccinations and parasite control for your pet cats.** Pet cats (or dogs) may pick up illness or fleas from stray or wild animals and bring them into our homes. While keeping cats indoors is the most certain way to minimize this risk, even indoor cats should be kept current on rabies vaccination and treated for fleas and internal parasites as needed.

For more information about community cats and zoonotic disease for veterinarians involved in TNR, see our FAQ [here](#).

Kate F. Hurley, DVM, MPVM, Dip. ABVP (Shelter Medicine)

Koret Shelter Medicine Program

School of Veterinary Medicine

University of California-Davis