Update for WA veterinarians on *Ehrlichia canis*

13 July 2020

**Background**

- The disease ehrlichiosis was confirmed in dogs in the north of Western Australia in May 2020 and in two locations in the Northern Territory in June 2020.
- The disease is caused by a tick-borne bacteria called *Ehrlichia canis*.
- This is the first time ehrlichiosis infection has been detected in dogs in Australia that were not imported.
- Infected dogs do not directly transmit the disease to other dogs. Transmission only occurs through infected ticks such as the brown dog tick, which is widespread in Australia.
- There is no evidence of change in the type or distribution of ticks in northern Australia.
- Infected dogs do not transmit ehrlichiosis to people, however, in rare cases, infected ticks may infect people. The Western Australian Department of Health has information on their [website](#) about ticks and human health precautions.

**Reporting**

- Ehrlichiosis is a nationally notifiable disease. This means, if you suspect a dog is showing signs of the disease, you must report it. You can do this by calling your local DPIRD field vet or the Emergency Animal Disease hotline on 1800 675 888 (available after hours).
- Any testing for *Ehrlichia canis* is to be conducted at the DPIRD Diagnostics & Laboratory Services (DDLS) and will be charge exempt. DDLS have the capacity to test for antigen and antibody for *E. canis*. Please collect and submit 5mL of serum and 5mL of blood in EDTA. Please submit using the [DDLS laboratory submission form](#) or form provided by your DPIRD vet.
Current situation

- In Western Australia, ehrlichiosis has been confirmed across the Kimberley including Kununurra, Wyndham, Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Broome and Derby.

- The movement conditions for the Kimberley (Kimberley Dog Controlled Area) remain in place while surveillance is undertaken to determine the distribution of *E. canis*. For more information about movement conditions, see the dog movements webpage or call the Pest and Diseases Information Service on (08) 9368 3929.

- Two detections of *E. canis* infection have been made in Port Hedland, slightly outside of the controlled area, and surveillance is now being targeted to the Pilbara.

- In June, the disease was also confirmed in dogs in the Northern Territory town of Katherine, and a remote community west of Alice Springs.

- Both the Western Australian and Northern Territory disease incidents were confirmed by testing undertaken at CSIRO’s Australian Centre for Disease Preparedness.

- Investigations into the origin of the infection in both Western Australia and the Northern Territory are ongoing with no obvious leads at this time. It is possible that the disease has been present in some regions for some time.

- All states and territories will undertake surveillance to determine the spread of the disease. The results of this surveillance will inform containment activities, including the movement conditions in the north of Western Australia and import conditions.

- DPIRD is asking WA veterinarians to raise awareness of the disease with their clients, and to report any dogs presenting with clinical signs.
• In cases of *E. canis* in dogs in the Kimberley, the most common presenting signs have been high fever and lethargy (>60% affected dogs), anorexia (59%) and anaemia (37%).

• In households where multiple dogs have been tested, there is a high incidence of *E. canis*.

**Advice to dog owners**

• DPIRD has been liaising with private vets and community groups in the Kimberley and Pilbara areas, as well as providing communications materials including posters, brochures and bin stickers to vet surgeries, rescue organisations, local shires, visitors centres, caravan parks, shopping centres and wherever people bring their dogs.

• DPIRD has also conducted a Facebook campaign targeting dog owners in northern WA and people planning to visit northern WA with their dogs.

• The communications focus on these messages:
  - Dog owners can take the following actions to help reduce the risk of infection in their dogs.
  - Keep your dog on a tick control program.
  - Talk to your vet about the tick treatment that is right for your dog.
  - Brown dog ticks are common in tropical/subtropical regions across the world and in northern Australia.
  - Inspect your dog daily for ticks and carefully remove them. Run your fingers through your dog’s coat over their skin and feel for abnormal bumps. Pay particular attention to the head and neck, inside their ears, on their chest, between their toes and around their mouths and gums.
  - If you find ticks on your dog, also treat their bedding and the yard for ticks.
• Contact your vet if your dog is showing any of signs of the disease, which include:
  o fever
  o lethargy
  o enlarged lymph nodes
  o loss of appetite
  o discharge from the eyes and nose
  o weight loss
  o anaemia and bleeding disorders such as nosebleeds or bleeding under the skin that looks like small spots, patches or bruising.

• Ehrlichiosis can also resemble other diseases already present, including tick-borne diseases such as anaplasmosis and babesiosis.

• Ehrlichiosis requires veterinary treatment and supportive care. You should contact your private vet if your dog is unwell because early treatment provides the best chance of recovery.

More information

More information is available on the DPIRD website at agric.wa.gov.au/ehrlichiosis.

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