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Update: Milwaukee Health Department Continues Investigation of Human Illness Linked to Prairie Dogs

The City of Milwaukee Health Department (MHD) along with the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS), State of Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta continue to investigate cases of human illness associated with individuals who came into contact with prairie dogs.

“The public health investigation has been significantly enhanced through close coordination with the CDC and with the assistance of DHFS and DATCP as well as other local public health jurisdictions,” said Paul Biedrzycki, Manager of Disease Control and Prevention with the MHD. “The investigation is now being ramped up on many fronts including laboratory analysis of clinical and animal specimens, trace back of animal distribution to select pet stores and outlets in the State and providing necessary infection control guidance to healthcare and veterinary providers.”

Additional activities being conducted as part of the overall investigation include:

- Joint DATCP and MHD inspection of two pet stores which handled, kept or sold prairie dogs to the public over the past month. Both of the store owners have been cooperative with DATCP and public health officials and have agreed to quarantine measures for store animals in the interim.
- Collection and submittal of animal specimens from one of the pet stores for analysis to the CDC for identification of possible infectious agents.
- Development of risk communication for healthcare workers and veterinary clinic staff associated with infection control, isolation and quarantine related to handling of sick animals.
- Continued investigation and follow-up on human cases of illness that may be associated with the handling or care of sick animals.

The public is reminded that careful hygiene practices should be followed whenever handling pets including thorough handwashing after coming into contact with any animal. In addition, prairie dogs should not be released to the wild, swapped or sold in the interim. If prairie dogs are ill they should be reported to the local animal control agency and/or public health department.

Symptoms of reported human cases of illness include: fever, chills, cough, malaise, swollen lymph nodes and lesions on the extremities and/or trunk. In Milwaukee County the MHD is reminding the public to report any cases of human illness involving the above symptoms AND contact with a prairie dog that has visibly exhibited signs of illness or disease. The MHD can be contacted at 414-286-3606 during normal business hours or at 414-286-3200 after hours. Outside of Milwaukee County persons should call their local public health agency or State of Wisconsin Division of Public Health at 608-266-2154.