The 411 on H1N1: Fact from Fiction

Earlier this fall, the Wisconsin state legislature passed a resolution urging all state agencies, their representatives, and all private media outlets to stop using the term "swine flu" and to instead refer to the virus as H1N1.

The reason is simple.

The current virus in this pandemic may have its roots going back as many as ten years in swine, but today there's absolutely, positively no direct association with pigs, explained Christopher W. Olsen, DVM PhD, professor of Public Health and associate dean for Academic Affairs at the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine. Since 1992, Dr. Olsen has been involved with UW research related to how viruses move between animals and people.

The swine flu misnomer comes from the fact that H1N1 in humans is genetically close to influenza viruses found in pigs.

But, as Dr. Olsen clarified, H1N1 is airborne, affecting the lungs and respiratory system, and not at all a food-borne illness, so there's no risk associated with handling or eating pork.

The risk of becoming infected with the pandemic H1N1 virus is not from contact with animals; H1N1 is spreading person-to-person, not animal-to-person.

Still, Dr. Olsen explained the significant role veterinarians play in controlling H1N1 as well as other communicable diseases.

First and foremost, veterinarians must continue to educate their clients and the public on what's true and untrue regarding H1N1, he said.

Additionally, the biosecurity efforts of large animal veterinarians on farms can prevent infected humans from transmitting the virus to the swine population and can keep other pathogens from infecting farm animals.

Biosecurity measures include developing policies and procedures that prevent the introduction of disease into an animal herd, including limiting the access humans and outside animals have to farms; in some cases requiring people to shower before and after they enter farms; washing trucks and equipment before and after they enter farms; keeping livestock up-to-date on vaccines, and many other procedures.

UW veterinarians and scientists, such as Dr. Olsen, have long been leaders in the world of influenza research, including the current influenza pandemic.

In fact, the work began in 1949, when Dr. Robert Hanson, another UW scientist, isolated an early example of influenza virus from pigs at what was then known as "Hill Farms" on the near west side of Madison. Today, the study of influenza viruses and their veterinary medical and human health implications continue with Dr. Olsen and his colleagues, Drs. Yoshihiro Kawaoka and Kathy Kurth, at the UW School of Veterinary Medicine.

Their labs study many aspects of influenza viruses, including the origins of new flu viruses, including H1N1, and how such viruses move among different species, spreading disease.

Sit! Stay! Drop that Chocolate!

Tis the season of chocolate. Halloween. Christmas. New Year's. Valentine's Day.

As Steve Erickson, DVM of All Pets Veterinary Clinic in Middleton points out, there are some situations you might not think of and some you should keep in mind -- this time of year.

Very often it's the kids in the household not the adults who leave chocolate accessible to dogs, said Dr. Erickson. And that's especially true around Halloween, when those trick-or-treat bags land on the floors of the kids' bedrooms.

That means parents need to be especially vigilant this time of year.

So, what do you do if you suspect your dog has ingested chocolate? Call your veterinarian's office right away.

When you call, be prepared with answers to some key questions, explained Dr. Erickson. How big is your dog? What is the breed? How much chocolate was ingested? And, what kind of chocolate was it?

That last question matters because different types of chocolate contain different levels of theobromine, a stimulant related to caffeine, and the ingredient that's toxic and potentially fatal -- to dogs.

Baking chocolate has the highest levels, followed by dark chocolate and then milk chocolate.

In fact, according to Dr. Erickson, theobromine is toxic to people as well but no human would ever eat enough chocolate for the theobromine levels to become toxic. It's the ratio of weight to theobromine concentration that's critical.

And while the weight of the dog and the amount of chocolate ingested factor into the equation, Dr. Erickson said there could be other variables in a specific situation, so it's always best to avoid playing amateur veterinarian and to call the veterinarian you know and trust.

So, what happens if your Labradoodle has become a little too friendly with a block of baking

chocolate?

First, we try to minimize the amount of chocolate absorbed from the GI tract by inducing vomiting and by giving activated charcoal to absorb any remaining, explained Dr. Erickson. But if the dog already shows signs of toxicity, we'll need to administer IV fluids, tranquilizers and even anti-seizure drugs.

Prevention is key when it comes to protecting dogs from chocolate. And be mindful of hidden dangers in the form of gift-wrapped boxes of chocolate -- during this upcoming holiday season.

With some extra caution and reminders to the kids you can keep Fido safe and healthy and avoid surprise veterinary expenses.

Dr. Erickson is the new WVMA president-elect.