



GUIDANCE ON VETERINARY PRACTICES AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC

MAY 08, 2020

On March 19, 2020, Governor Wolf and the Secretary of Health ordered the closure of all non-life sustaining businesses to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The Governor's Order is available [here](#) and the Secretary of Health's Order is available [here](#). All life-sustaining businesses maintaining physical operations during the COVID-19 pandemic must follow the Secretary of Health's [worker safety order](#), effective April 15, 2020.

Veterinary medicine services are life-sustaining businesses and have been permitted to continue to operate under the Governor's Order. The designation of veterinary medicine as a life-sustaining business does not eliminate the need for veterinarians to promote public health practices and align with efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. There are measures veterinarians can take to protect the health of their staff and the public. The Pennsylvania Departments of Health, Agriculture, and State appreciate the cooperation of the veterinary community and have developed the following guidance for veterinary practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Guidance for Veterinary Practices

The Pennsylvania State Board of Veterinary Medicine (State Board) has temporarily adopted the American Veterinary Medical Association's (AVMA's) COVID-19 guidelines, including the following:

- [Minimizing COVID-19 Exposure and Social Distancing in Veterinary Practice](#)
- [Guidelines for Use of Personal Protective Equipment \(PPE\)](#)
- [COVID -19: What Veterinarians Need to Know](#)

The temporary adoption of the guidelines was communicated through a special notice issued by the State Board, which can be found [here](#). Additionally, information regarding the use of telemedicine during the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporary suspension of some continuing education requirements can be found on the State Board's [website](#). With the Governor's authorization as conferred in the Proclamation of Disaster Emergency issued on March 6, 2020, the Pennsylvania Department of State suspended requirements related to [telemedicine](#) and [reactivation of retired practitioners](#). The State Board considers these guidelines as standards of care for practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Veterinarian practices should adhere to the State Board's guidance and recommendations from the AVMA and follow the guidance related to phased reopening, explained below, when determining whether to conduct a procedure. The [Patient Assessment](#) flowchart from the Pennsylvania Veterinary Medical Association (PVMA) and the [Triage Flowchart](#) from the American Veterinary



Medical Association (AVMA) are considered best practices. The State Board considers these guidelines as standards of care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Failure to recognize and institute measures for appropriate social distancing, and the preservation of PPE during the emergency disaster declaration may constitute unprofessional conduct and be subject to disciplinary action by the State Board.

Non-Essential, Routine or Elective Surgical Procedures, including Spay/Neuter

As recommended by the AVMA, for the safety of clients and staff, non-essential services and routine or elective surgical procedures should be postponed. Routine procedures are defined as those that can be postponed for at least three months without undue risk to an animal's current or future health. Production medicine and surgery are deemed essential.

Examples of non-essential services include: wellness exams, routine vaccinations (except as specified below), routine heartworm tests for animals with a history of prevention and testing, routine spay/neuter surgeries, routine dental cleanings (e.g., no expectation of extractions), routine senior bloodwork, reproduction cases (excepting production animals), stable chronic cases that are due for a recheck (e.g., rechecking an ultrasound or echocardiogram, neurology recheck, orthopedic examination, etc.), and most rehabilitation appointments.

Pennsylvania's Dog Law requires shelters and rescues to have dogs and cats spayed/neutered prior to adoption. In consultation with the Pennsylvania Department of Health and the Pennsylvania Veterinary Medical Association (PVMA), effective April 2, 2020, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has temporarily [waived](#) this requirement due to concerns over the spread of COVID-19. This action will allow conservation of PPE and limit risk of exposure to COVID-19 for veterinarians. Shelters must keep a running list of pets adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, provide a copy to the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, and follow up with adopted pet owners to ensure the procedure takes place. As previously indicated by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, adoptive pet owners will have up to 120 days from the time of adoption (timeframe to be re-evaluated as necessary) to have a procedure completed.

Administration of Vaccinations

In consultation with the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Dog Law, the Pennsylvania Department of Health is recommending the following protocols be followed regarding vaccines:

- Core vaccines required by a dog or cat under one year of age are considered essential to ensure immunity against diseases such as Parvo, Panleukopenia, Distemper, Rabies, etc. and can be administered. First time rabies vaccines for all dogs are considered essential. Timing



of these immunization should be based on potential risk to animal health tempered with risk of human-to-human exposure.

- For equine practitioners, vaccination against West Nile Virus, Eastern Equine Encephalitis/Western Equine Encephalitis/Tetanus, or other diseases that in the veterinarian's medical opinion may be deadly or have long-term negative health effects, can be administered in addition to rabies vaccine. Timing of these immunization should be based on potential risk to animal health tempered with risk of human-to-human exposure. Necessary foal and pregnant mare vaccinations and vaccinations for high-risk patients (e.g., adult horse with no prior botulism vaccination moved to high-risk premises) can also be administered. Individual animal health issues must be considered when deciding which vaccines to administer and when. Diagnostic testing such as, but not limited to, Equine Infectious Anemia and Equine Piroplasmiasis Testing required for interstate movement may be completed. Strictly, vaccination clinics or equine health clinics should not be conducted in counties under phase red of the emergency period, as these may lead to congregating of owners, increasing the potential for COVID-19 transmission. Social distancing must be maintained whenever possible by veterinarians and owners when conducting vaccinations in barns or other settings.
- If an animal is older than one year of age and has no discernible vaccine history, core vaccines for that animal may be considered essential and may be administered at the discretion of the veterinarian.
- Kennel owners certified by Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture to administer their own rabies vaccinations should continue to do so, following their regular schedule.
- "Boostering" of rabies vaccination in an animal previously inoculated should be reserved only for cases where confirmed or suspected rabies exposure has occurred. This only applies to rabies boosters as first time rabies vaccinations for all dogs are considered essential. Neither first time nor booster rabies vaccines should be administered at places other than the location of the veterinary practice, such as vaccination clinics. Pet owners who are concerned about delaying a rabies booster should contact their veterinarian, as the veterinarian has professional discretion to administer rabies boosters as needed, even in counties under stay-at-home orders.
- "Boostering" of other vaccines that have come due on a yearly or triennial basis should be postponed unless medically necessary due a localized disease outbreak (e.g., parvovirus outbreak in a community, etc.).



- All pet owners must ensure their animals are vaccinated and in compliance with the Pennsylvania Rabies Law, with allowances to postpone rabies boosters from March 19, 2020 until 30 days after the date the owner's home county moves to phase yellow. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has obtained a limited waiver of Section 455.8(a)(3) of the Pennsylvania Rabies Act related to rabies revaccination deadlines, and the Bureau of Dog Law Enforcement will not issue citations to pet owners who fall under this limited waiver.
- If vaccines are administered, veterinary practices should follow CDC and AVMA guidelines on personal protection measures, including the use of PPE, and social distancing when possible, to ensure the safety of staff.

Use of Telemedicine/Telehealth

Under the emergency disaster declaration, veterinarians are permitted to use telemedicine to conduct patient visits within the bounds of a valid Veterinary-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR). The necessity and importance of an in-person physical examination when establishing a VCPR cannot be overstated. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there may be instances when your best medical and professional judgment weighs in favor of establishing a VCPR without an in-person physical examination. When deciding how to proceed, consider all relevant facts, including:

- Reasons why the client is seeking care;
- Availability of in-person veterinary care in the client's area at the time of the request;
- Level of risk to the animal if care is not provided;
- Any risk associated with establishing the VCPR without a physical examination;
- Risk of the transmission of COVID-19 to clients or staff.

The owner of the animal being treated via telemedicine without a physical examination should be informed that telemedicine without a physical examination is not in accordance with the usual standard of care, and could have adverse effects on the animal, especially when prescribing medications. Documentation of the appointment, examination and any suggested or required treatment must be kept. Complete documentation may not relieve a veterinarian of liability should your decisions lack sound medical or professional judgment and lead to bad outcomes.



Support Services for Small Animals

Boarding kennels, animal rescues, animal and pet shops are considered life-sustaining businesses under the Orders to close non-life-sustaining businesses but should only be open to the extent that they provide life-sustaining supplies for pets and owners, or to the extent that they support life-sustaining businesses like providing kenneling care for health care or other essential workers. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture has issued [guidance](#) to animal shelters and boarding kennels.

Transport of animals by rescues and shelters should be limited to emergency shelter intake or for medical care only. Travel should not be utilized to continue non-emergency shelter intake during COVID-19 mitigation. As an alternative, transfer between shelters in the same community and delivery for foster care or adoption is encouraged as it promotes live releases while maintaining recommended social distancing guidelines.

Providing Services During Phased Reopening

The [Governor's plan to reopen Pennsylvania](#) utilizes a three-phase matrix to determine when counties and/or regions can begin to ease restrictions. Businesses in the commonwealth that are permitted to conduct in-person operations during the disaster emergency must take precautions to protect their employees, their employees' families, and their communities. All businesses (including those businesses whose in-person operations were originally closed and later permitted to reopen) conducting in-person operations must review and adhere to [this guidance](#) and commit to ensuring the health and safety of their employees and the public.

Veterinary decisions should be based on the level of community spread and risk of transmission to clients and staff. Medical and professional judgment can - and should - evolve as the situation changes in each community. Procedures that could be delayed in mid-March may be more urgent now. For example, vaccinations that are becoming severely overdue, such as Lyme, leptospirosis, parvovirus, rabies booster shots, and others, may be considered essential at this time.

Additionally, grooming services may be performed in areas that are in the yellow phase of reopening as long as businesses performing grooming services adhere to business guidance to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Practices that are able to offer limited contact or zero-contact services should continue to do so, especially when working with clients who are at high risk for COVID-19 or those who request accommodations for their personal protection. This is especially important as counties and regions move through the phased reopening, which may involve additional restrictions if outbreaks occur in certain areas.

The need to provide services must be balanced against the risk of spreading COVID-19 to veterinary staff and within the community at large. In regions of Pennsylvania that continue to experience high



numbers of new cases and remain in the red phase, it is still recommended that non-essential services be postponed.

Moving forward, in counties that move from red to yellow, veterinary practices in Pennsylvania are encouraged to use their best professional judgment in determining the patients that can be safely seen in the clinic and those that can be treated through telemedicine. Practices should maintain the social distancing standards already in place (curbside service, use of PPE, etc.). We trust that veterinarians will make the best decisions possible to preserve animal health, limit risk to employees, and protect public health and safety.