

Tips for Pet Sitters During the COVID-19 Pandemic

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a human respiratory disease that was initially discovered in late 2019. This viral illness is caused by SARS-CoV-2, a new coronavirus that has not previously been identified in humans.

There are many different coronaviruses, which cause a wide variety of diseases. In humans, a coronavirus causes the common cold. Coronaviruses are also responsible for diarrhea in young dogs and feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) in cats. Although all coronaviruses are related, they are *not* all the same virus. For example, SARS-CoV-2 cannot cause FIP and vice versa.



How is COVID-19 spread?

Coronaviruses spread from person to person in several different ways. Because COVID-19 is a new illness, we are still learning about its methods of spread.

At this time, the most common methods of spread are thought to be:

- **Respiratory droplets:** When infected people cough or sneeze, they shed fluid droplets that contain the virus. If you are within 6 feet (2 meters) of an infected person, you could contract the virus in this way. People who are sick should wear a mask—even a cloth mask—to help decrease droplet spread when coughing or sneezing.
- **Contaminated surfaces:** The virus may be able to survive on surfaces for hours or even days. If you touch a contaminated surface and then touch your face, you could become infected.

Therefore, the most effective things that you can do to prevent infection are to avoid close contact with others (a concept referred to as "physical distancing" or "social distancing"), limit your contact with potentially contaminated surfaces, and wash your hands frequently.

Does COVID-19 spread from humans to animals, or from animals to humans?

All of the information to date (as of April 20, 2020) indicates that dogs and cats can be infected by the COVID-19 virus, but it appears to be an infrequent occurrence. In Hong Kong, at least 17 dogs and 9 cats have been tested from homes with owners that were either confirmed COVID-19 cases or were close contacts to a COVID-19 patient, and only 2 dogs and 2 cats have tested positive. Keep in mind that to date, there are over two million human cases of COVID-19 and only a few pets have tested positive and only one has exhibited signs and tested positive.

It is important to understand that evidence of infection is not evidence of animals being able to spread the virus to humans. The situation is evolving and is being monitored by animal health experts around the world.

What are the risks to pet sitters during the COVID-19 pandemic?

As your pet-sitting clients limit their travel in order to practice physical distancing, you may find that you are faced with fewer pet-sitting jobs. However, some pet-sitting clients may still need pet-sitters if they are working long shifts, traveling to care for a family member, or hospitalized for medical care.

It is important to limit your in-person contact with clients. If possible, do most of your client communication via phone or email. If you must meet with a client in person, try to maintain a distance of at least 6 feet during conversation to minimize the risk of viral spread. People can shed the virus even when they are asymptomatic, so it is important to practice physical distancing even with clients who appear healthy.

"When you enter client homes to care for pets, try to limit your contact with potentially contaminated objects."

When you enter client homes to care for pets, try to limit your contact with potentially contaminated objects. Although we are still learning about this new coronavirus, it appears to remain infectious on some surfaces for several days. If you touch a contaminated surface (like a doorknob or counter) and then touch your face, you could potentially be infected with the virus. In addition to surfaces and objects within the home, there is some concern that pets' coats could potentially become contaminated with coronavirus if an owner coughs or sneezes on them.

Remember, you are not only responsible for protecting your own health, but also the health of your community, including your other clients. We are all in this together. Even if you are at relatively low risk of serious complications associated with COVID-19, you need to minimize the risk that you could spread the virus to others.

What specific steps can pet sitters take to decrease the risks associated with COVID-19?

In order to minimize risk to yourself and others, use caution when interacting with clients and when touching anything that could be contaminated.

Consider the following:

- Limit how often you touch doorknobs, countertops, pet supplies, etc. in your clients' homes.
- Wash your hands frequently, for at least 20 seconds, and rinse for 10 seconds. Hand sanitizer can also be used, if you do not have access to soap and water.
- Avoid touching your face. If you must do so, wash your hands thoroughly first and then again after.
- Limit close personal contact with client's pets. For example, avoid kissing pets on the head or allowing them to lick your face.
- When you walk dogs, maintain a distance of 6 feet (2 meters) from other people. Look for quiet, uncrowded routes, so you can minimize interactions with others.
- If you will be staying in the home while pet sitting, ensure that you put clean sheets on the bed and thoroughly sanitize the parts of the house that you will be using (especially the kitchen and bathroom). Do this at both the beginning and end of your stay.

How should pet sitters communicate with their clients during this time?

Communicate with your clients regularly during this pandemic. Having information about your clients' health can help you avoid taking unnecessary risks.

Ask your clients to notify you if:

- anyone in the home has shown respiratory signs or fever
- anyone in the home has been in contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19
- anyone in the home has a high risk of occupational exposure to COVID-19 (for example, an emergency room physician)
- anyone in the home (or their close contacts) have a history of international travel (including to the US or Canada)

Keep in mind that you are not only trying to protect yourself; you are also protecting your other clients and other people you are in contact with.

If a client has respiratory signs or has been exposed to COVID-19, you should assume that they are already infected. Take appropriate measures to protect yourself and your other pet-sitting clients. Contact your local health department to determine how to proceed.

Clients at high risk of occupational exposure also deserve special consideration. They could be infected and shedding the virus, even without showing clinical signs. Therefore, you may want to visit their homes later in the day, in order to minimize the risk of carrying virus to your other clients' homes.

Finally, if you develop *any* signs of COVID-19, including cough, fever, and/or shortness of breath, it is important that you stay home. Create a backup plan for this scenario now, before you become ill, so that you can quickly update your clients and ensure that client pets receive appropriate care.

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