

Possible New Illness In Ferrets

Ferrets with severe dehydration and diarrhea might be suffering from a possible new strain of epizootic catarrhal enteritis.

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Posted: December 24, 2008, 4. p.m. EST

In mid-December, Dr. Ruth Heller of the Borderbrook Animal Hospital in Murraysville, Pennsylvania, posted to the Ferret Health List on the Internet about a mysterious new illness in ferrets that might possibly be a new strain of epizootic catarrhal enteritis (ECE). Heller is also a ferret breeder. She reported that many of her ferrets recently became ill and 11 have died. Since her posting, some other ferret owners now say they believe their ferrets also suffered this mysterious ailment and some ferrets have died. Reports on this illness are anecdotal and vary, some going as far back as this summer.

Right now, it's not known what the disease is or how it is spread. With reports from Heller and others, the hope is to get these questions answered so ferret owners and veterinarians know what to look for in pet ferrets or how to possibly prevent this illness.

Signs And Treatment

According to Heller, the signs of this illness include extreme dehydration. "The hallmark of this disease is the immense dehydration. These ferrets are like chunks of wood, they are so dry," Heller said.

Heller stated that other signs seen in her group of ferrets are:

- 1) Going from a "happy, healthy, bouncy ferret to cold/flat/extremely dehydrated ferret with or without bloody diarrhea in the span of less than eight hours"
- 2) Extreme difficulty rehydrating. Heller said that some of the ferrets she's treating require 200 or more cc of fluids per day
- 3) Appetite is variable — some ferrets eat on their own, others don't
- 4) Diarrhea is copious, liquid and progresses to bloody
- 5) No vomiting was noted
- 6) The diarrhea is not green, as is usual with normal cases of ECE
- 7) Death can be as rapid as eight hours after first onset of clinical signs
- 8) Some ferrets experienced a bit of diarrhea, but have not shown the other signs and have recovered uneventfully

Heller contacted a couple of veterinary pathologists about this, and their best guess is that this is a mutated strain of ECE, but this is not confirmed. Test results are pending to confirm if this is indeed the case.

Tests already completed have ruled out bacterial infection and Coccidia. Heller also reported the following on other test results. "We do know that it is not: Helicobacter infection, no evidence of Helicobacter was found in the tissue when histopathology was done; Or Aleutian Disease, nothing typical of that, and my household is tested every six months since we show and breed; Fecal cultures were negative; Fecal analysis was negative; Bloodwork [showed] anemia, low platelets, non-clotting blood in later stages, elevation of kidney values, moderately low blood sugar, normal to slightly low albumin, normal liver values."

"Post-mortem exams on these ferrets don't show all that much other than gastrointestinal inflammation and some ulceration," Heller said.

Several severely affected ferrets have been treated successfully by Heller. Her treatment involves aggressive fluid therapy, IV if possible or lots of subcutaneous fluids, together with the medications she lists here. "Carafate every two to three hours; an antibiotic — amoxi, clavamox, baytril, clindamycin are all ones we've tried; possibly metronidazole, although it doesn't seem to make a big difference in the ones it's been used in so far; omeprazole; and Tamiflu." Heller said she hasn't lost any ferrets since starting Tamiflu and recommends any household where this illness appears to put all ferrets in the household on Tamiflu.

Concerns For Ferret Owners

What does all this mean to ferret owners? If your ferret develops diarrhea, should you rush it to the veterinarian? Heller said no, not unless the ferret has diarrhea for more than a day. She believes owners won't confuse a bout of the flu with this illness because the signs of this illness are so severe. "Their entire appearance changes, and they are flat/depressed

and cold.” Heller said. “We had one with a temperature of 92 [degrees Fahrenheit] when we found him; he had been completely normal less than eight hours previously. The diarrhea is massive, and usually bloody, although not always.”

Although the cause of this illness and its method of spreading isn't yet known, Heller recommends that ferret owners stay away from other ferrets. If owners do come in contact with other ferrets, she said they should change clothes and shower before touching their own ferrets.

If a ferret does seem to have this illness, Heller wants people to be sure to have their vet consider ECE, even if the ferret isn't suffering green diarrhea. However, she warned that people shouldn't automatically jump to the conclusion that this mystery disease is the culprit. “There are lots of other diseases out there to watch for. Sometimes the new disease becomes so much the focus of attention that what's really going on gets missed.”

Is There A Pattern?

Barb Clay of Rocky's Ferret Rescue And Shelter in Maryland hasn't had any ferrets fall ill, but she's on an Internet forum that's discussing this situation. She sent a post to The Ferret Mailing List about a website created by Stephanie Richmond to track confirmed and suspected cases of this illness. “By illustrating where the outbreaks are,” Clay said. “we can be more vigilant with our personal and professional practices and work toward containing this bug and minimizing further outbreaks.”