



Helping pets suffering from MRSA

Honorary Patron - Claire Rayner

MRSA INFECTION IN PETS

The Bella Moss Foundation

In August 2004, Bella Louise Moss, a ten-year-old Samoyed and companion to Jill Moss, became the first UK companion animal to die as a result of MRSA. From the loss and trauma of Bella's passing Jill started a website and charity, The Bella Moss Foundation, to inform pet owners on the risks of MRSA in pets and support them in the steps they could take to minimise the dangers. This leaflet offers some of that information and support.

For more details visit www.pets-mrsa.com and www.thebellamossfoundation.com.

MRSA (Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*), sometimes referred to in the media as the SUPERBUG, kills around 5,000 human patients a year. It affects both humans and animals. MRSA is a bacterium that, under normal conditions, is relatively harmless. We all live with different kinds of bacteria (*Staphylococcus* included) in us and on us without harmful effects, but problems can occur when they get into the blood stream or tissue through a cut or broken skin, particularly if our immune system is weakened. MRSA can be so difficult to treat that in some cases it is fatal.

It has been thought for many years that the extensive (and often unnecessary) use of antibiotics has led to the development of resistant strains of bacteria. Not just in humans, though. Animals of all sorts have been given antibiotics to increase their weight, and some apple farmers in the US spray antibiotics routinely on their fruit trees. All of this goes towards helping bacteria develop resistance to the very things that we need to use to treat serious infections.

MRSA is everywhere, and just as hospitals spread the bug to people, veterinary clinics and surgeries can also serve as a source of contamination of pets and staff.

For pets as well as people, MRSA infection can be life threatening.

How is MRSA Contracted?

MRSA is spread by direct contact or by air currents or by sneezes or coughs, and can be conveyed by people going from one environment to another. Research shows that it moves from the environment to people, from person to person, person to animal, or animal to person or environment. Pets can become carriers through the close physical contact they have with owners and vice versa, or from veterinary staff who fail to wash properly after handling a carrier animal. Surgical sites can become infected by bacteria falling from the skin into the wound, or from contaminated hands or instruments or by droplets from an uncovered mouth or nose.

The evidence indicates that pets are most likely to become infected during surgery.

What are the things I should look for?

Infections can be diagnosed from: **DISCHARGE OR INFLAMMATION FROM A SURGICAL WOUND. A WOUND THAT IS NOT HEALING AND RESPONDING TO REGULAR TREATMENT; RAISED TEMPERATURE; RAISED WHITE BLOOD CELL COUNT; INFLAMMATION: REPEATED SKIN INFECTIONS; LOSS OF APPETITE AND EXTREME LETHARGY; DEPPRESSED Demeanor IN A PET.**

What Questions Should I ask If My Pet Has To Undergo Surgery?

Ask what antibiotic cover your pet is likely to need prior to any surgery, and what bacteria these antibiotics will kill. Ask what steps they take to minimise the possibility of an infection getting into the surgical wound (such as cleaning the area with iodine and surgical alcohol). Ask whether your vet will be fully gowned and masked and whether another vet will be in charge of anaesthesia. Ask how much your pet will be monitored after the operation, whether the wound will be dressed or not and

whether your pet will be in an area with other animals. Ask what signs will tell the vet that an infection is present in the operation wound and what action will be taken if one should occur. Ask if they are aware of any facility that is more expert or familiar with the operation your pet has to undergo, and ask what the policy on referring to specialist centres is. Ask what the normal recover period is and what signs might indicate a post-operative infection.

What Can I Do To Ensure My Pet Is Safe For The Future?

Talk to your vet about your concerns, especially if your pet is to undergo surgery. Avoid your pet spending any time longer than necessary in a veterinary hospital (this may be a more likely cause of colonisation), and don't allow your pet to be exposed to known carriers of MRSA. Ask if your vet is aware of the guidelines issued by the BSAVA and whether the practice adheres to them. Also, ask whether their premises comply with the BSAVA guidelines and how has that compliance been validated.

What Should I Do If I Think My Pet May Have An Infection?

Don't wait! If your pet has had an operation but is not recovering as expected, TELL YOUR VET. Ask for a clear indication of what they think might be the problem and how they will deal with it. Ask for swabs to be taken for culture immediately, and don't be fobbed off with any explanation that doesn't clearly explain what is going on. Ask your vet to be honest about what he or she does and does not know, and don't encourage them to tell you what you want to hear.

These are just some of the things you can ask; many more may occur to you. The important thing is BE INFORMED and don't be afraid to let your vet know that you are not ignorant. If he or she doesn't like that, then they are not worth staying with.

Are some animals more likely to become MRSA carriers than others?

There is no clear-cut answer to which species may be more vulnerable, but current thinking is that dogs are probably less likely to become carriers than other animals because their endemic strain of Staphylococcus is not Staph. Aureus, but Staph. intermedius, and this seems to make it harder for Staph. A. (and MRSA) to get established. Vulnerability may depend much more on issues of health than on issues of species, and ill, old or very young animals may be much more at risk than healthy mature animals.

What is the real risk and danger to my pet from MRSA?

MRSA is only a risk or danger to animals that are not healthy. This includes those animals that have a long-term problem with their immune system or that have to undergo surgical procedures. **Otherwise, there is generally no real risk and no need to panic!** MRSA itself is only a danger when it infects a vulnerable body. Being a carrier in itself is not significant and should not be a cause for concern unless there are vulnerable people in close, direct contact.

For more information and the PETS-MRSA forum visit www.pets-mrsa.com and www.thebellamosfoundation.com or email jill@pets-mrsa.com.



Jill Moss, President of The Bella Moss Foundation, with Bella

“Bella was my companion, buddy and confidante; what happened to her shouldn't happen to a dog.”

Jill Moss

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