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More ferrets in Oregon get swine flu from owners

By Lynne Terry, The Oregonian

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More ferrets in Oregon have developed swine flu from their owners, fueling worries that the virus could jump from the pets to people.

"We are advising vets to take care because of the possibility of animal to human transmission," said Emilio DeBess, the state public health veterinarian.

So far, the virus has only gone one way — from owners to their ferrets.

In early October, the first case of human to ferret transmission of the H1N1 virus was documented by DeBess in the Portland area. Then at the end of last month, nine ferrets owned by a family in Roseburg came down with flulike symptoms, he said.

That was a week after two kids in the Roseburg family — a teenager and a child younger than 10 — got sick with the swine flu.

Like the kids, the ferrets developed high fevers, red eyes, runny noses and they were coughing and sneezing.

"If the ferrets could talk, they'd say 'Oh my God, my body aches,'" DeBess said.

Tests on three of the ferrets confirmed that they had the H1N1 virus. DeBess suspects that the others had the virus as well.

Ferrets, which mimic human flu symptoms, are used in labs researching the flu. DeBess said ferrets are especially susceptible to catching pneumonia.

A pet ferret in Nebraska that caught the H1N1 virus from its family died, and a cat in Iowa has come down with the virus, said Michael San Filippo, spokesman for the **American Veterinary Medical Association**.

Pigs in Indiana have also contracted the virus along with swine in Canada and other countries. Two health inspectors were infected with the H1N1 virus when they visited the sick swine herd in Canada, San Filippo said.

"These are the only two cases that we know of of animals passing the virus to people," San Filippo said. "All the other cases involve are people passing it to animals."

Still, DeBess has warned veterinarians in the state to protect themselves from sneezing and coughing ferrets and other pets. Owners need to take precautions as well, he said.

The virus passes from humans to ferrets — or cats — the same way it is transmitted among humans. Coughing and sneezing can spread the virus which can remain infectious for about a week outside the body. That means that owners — and vets — need to thoroughly wash their hands when handling sick pets or when they are sick.

The ferrets and their owners in both the Portland area and Roseburg are fine, DeBess said.

The flu season is far from over. So far, 1,015 people have been hospitalized in Oregon with influenza-like illness and 33 people have died, the Department of Human Services said today.

The state has sent up a Web page [here](#) with the latest information about influenza in Oregon.

-- Lynne Terry

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