



## What does the new canine disease, Ehrlichiosis, mean for Local Government and the community?

The year 2020 raised another major health challenge for our communities, specifically for our dog friends.

Ehrlichiosis (the disease caused by the bacteria *Ehrlichia Canis* (aka *E. canis*)) was confirmed for the first time in Australian dogs in May 2020 in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, and since then cases have been confirmed in other districts of WA, and in the Northern Territory and Northern South Australia. Ehrlichiosis is a tick-borne disease that is spread by the Brown Dog tick (*Rhipicephalus sanguineus*). Until the first detection in May 2020, the disease was not known to occur in Australia. Dogs can get the disease when a tick carrying *Ehrlichia canis* bites them, having sucked blood from an infected dog. While very rare, there is a small risk that the disease could infect people if a person is bitten by a tick carrying the bacteria.

While variable in its presentation, Ehrlichiosis is known to have three general phases for dogs. When they are first infected, dogs with ehrlichiosis often get sleepy, don't want to eat and lose weight. They might have a fever, unusual bruising, or nose bleeds. These signs may last 2-4 weeks and without treatment, some dogs will die in this initial phase.

If dogs recover from this early phase they may develop cloudy eyes approximately 1-2 months after the initial infection. Usually the cloudiness goes away after a few weeks.

Dogs that recover from the initial phase may no longer look sick, but *Ehrlichia canis* can still be in the blood of these dogs. If these dogs are bitten by ticks, the ticks can continue to spread the disease to other dogs.

Some dogs that recover from the initial infection might eventually develop long-term health problems due to ehrlichiosis. These problems can take months or even years to become evident. Dogs with this chronic phase of ehrlichiosis may have problems with their kidneys, bone marrow or



with other infections. Sadly, these problems are usually severe and typically end in death, even despite veterinary treatment.

Treatment is reliant on early diagnosis and the use of antibiotics. Successful treatment is much less likely the longer the dog has had the infection.

Prevention is key! However not just any tick prevention will do. *Ehrlichia canis* can transmit very rapidly once a tick attaches to a dog. In areas where *E canis* has been detected, a tick-repellent product (such as a tick collar), in combination with a chewable tick preventative is recommended to prevent ticks from attaching and stop dogs from becoming infected. In areas where *E canis* is not yet present, and where the risk is lower, a single tick preventative product is usually sufficient. Local veterinarians will be able to advise on the best approach for tick control in your specific region. Controlling the tick population in the environment is also helpful and advice from a pest control specialist is worthwhile.

**Ehrlichiosis is a nationally notifiable disease.** This means that the nearest Veterinarian or the national Emergency Animal Disease Watch hotline (1800 675 888) must be advised at the earliest opportunity. While the disease has to-date, only been detected in WA, NT and SA, it is expected to continue to spread, particularly with human-assisted dog movement.

Dog owners, caretakers and those working with dogs in your community need your help to be informed of this new risk to the health of their companions. Travellers, dog social and training groups, boarding facilities, shelters and pounds are good places to start with awareness programs.

For more information watch the AIAM webinar, "What does the dog disease, Erlichiosis, mean for Local Government?", contact your State animal health department or see the extensive range of resources available on the AMRRIC website at [www.amrric.org](http://www.amrric.org)

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