

GUIDELINES FOR ANIMALS IN INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS

Introduction

Animals can reduce loneliness and social isolation for residents in long-term care and retirement homes. While pet visitation and therapy programs support resident well-being, they also introduce a risk of infectious disease transmission. Those at highest risk include adults over 65, individuals who are immuno-compromised, pregnant people, young children, and people with cognitive disabilities who may have increased exposure risks.

These health risks can be minimized through proper animal handling, appropriate restrictions, and effective cleaning practices. Key risk factors include poor pet care, inadequate hand hygiene, improper waste disposal, and using kitchen sinks for animal-related tasks.

York Region Public Health provides guidelines to help institutional settings reduce the risk of zoonotic infections. Facilities should maintain an up-to-date pet care policy specific to their environment, clearly assign responsibility for its oversight, and involve the IPAC program in its development and review.

Choose appropriate animals

Institutional settings should screen all animals residing in or visiting the home based on the following criteria:

- **Animal type:** Only dogs, cats, rabbits, caged birds, and fish are acceptable. Dogs are preferred, as cats cannot be reliably trained for safe interactions
- **Vaccination status:** Cats and dogs over three months must have up-to-date rabies vaccinations, with records kept on-site
- **General health:** Animals must have annual veterinary checkups and show no signs of illness on the day of the visit. Animals are not permitted if they have fever, vomiting, incontinence, open wounds, skin or ear infections, fleas or ticks, are on antimicrobials for active infection, have consumed raw food within 90 days, or show signs of distress
- **Cleanliness:** Animals must be bathed, groomed, and brushed within 24 hours of the visit. Nails must be short and smooth
- **Age and temperament:** Animals must have lived with their owner for at least six months, be at least one year old, fully vaccinated, house-trained, and not pregnant or recently postpartum. They must display calm, non-aggressive behaviour. Animals showing inappropriate behaviour should be removed and have visiting privileges revoked
- **Pet visitation restrictions:** High-risk animals, including reptiles, birds (non-caged), spiders, non-human primates, ferrets, rodents, amphibians, and animals from shelters, are not permitted due to increased risk of disease transmission

PUBLIC HEALTH

1-877-464-9675

TTY: Dial 711

york.ca



Record keeping

Homes should maintain records of all animal visits, including information such as:

- Date and time of visit
- Location and name of resident visited
- Animal handler's contact information
- Animal type
- Proof of animal health documentation (provided during first visit)
- Proof of rabies vaccination, if applicable

Communication within institutional setting

- Pet visitation criteria are clearly defined, such as when the health care team determines a visit will benefit a resident.
- Health Care Workers (HCWs)/staff ensure all visits are coordinated in accordance with organizational policies and procedures.
- The pet handler notifies the appropriate HCW/staff member (e.g., nursing unit administrator or designate) upon arrival, and the pet's presence in specific areas is communicated according to policy (e.g., door signage)

Recommendations for pet handlers

- Notify health care organization or appropriate unit in advance of the visit consistent with organizational policies and procedures
- Self-screen and defer the visit if they have signs of an infection (e.g., fever, new/worsening cough, vomiting, diarrhea, new rash, etc.)
- Remain with and is responsible for the pet at all times, including monitoring all interactions during the visit. This applies to staff who bring pets to work, if permitted by organizational policy
- Perform hand hygiene upon entry and exiting the resident room
- Prevent contact between the pet and resident non-intact skin, wounds, invasive devices and/or medical equipment
- Allow only the intended resident to have contact with the animal
- Notify the unit in the event of environmental soiling and follow organizational policies and procedures for cleaning and disinfection the area
- Attest that the pet has been screened for behaviour/temperament and is responsible for the animals' behaviour

Animal visits

Institutional settings should ensure that animals' access within the home is restricted to reduce the spread of disease and promote the health and well being of the animal.

1. RESTRICTED ACCESS

- Restrict access to food and hygiene areas — Keep animals and their dwellings out of food prep/storage areas, dining rooms, laundry rooms, showers, bathrooms, and clean/sterile storage spaces
- Keep animals out of chemical and medication areas — Do not allow animals in chemical storage or medication rooms
- Exclude animals from high-risk areas — Do not permit animals in rooms of residents on Additional Precautions, outbreak areas, or other high-risk zones
 - Visits may be allowed with IPAC consultation when appropriate
- Protect individuals with sensitivities — Keep animals away from residents or staff with allergies, phobias, or aversions, document preferences in care plans or with signage

2. ANIMAL VISIT REQUIREMENTS

- Limit visit duration — Keep animal visits to one hour or less
- Allow one animal per handler — Only one animal per handler per visit
- Maintain control of animals — Keep animals on a short, clean leash or in a clean carrier
- Avoid animal-to-animal interaction — Do not allow therapy animals, visiting pets, or resident animals to interact
- Prevent contact with clinical risks — Keep animals away from invasive devices, open wounds, non-intact skin, bandages, and food
- Discourage animals on beds — If bed access is allowed, use an impermeable barrier and launder linens afterward
- Avoid cloth furniture and carpets — Keep animals off upholstered furniture and carpeted areas
- Discourage feeding and close contact — No eating during visits; avoid feeding animals, kissing them, or allowing licking. Wash skin and perform hand hygiene if licking occurs

3. THERAPY ANIMALS

- Ensure therapy animal registration — Therapy animals must be registered with a recognized therapy animal association
- Require training and evaluation — Therapy animals must complete association-approved training and temperament testing

4. MOBILE PETTING ZOOS

- Use appropriate spaces — Hold visits outdoors when possible or in areas that can be cleaned and disinfected (no carpet)
- Perform hand hygiene — Residents must clean their hands before and after animal contact

Hand hygiene

Hand hygiene is essential for all residents, staff, and animal handlers. Proper hand hygiene should be performed both before and after contact with animals. Homes should ensure handwashing stations are located near where animals are being handled, and that there is an adequate supply of liquid soap with paper towels or alcohol-based hand sanitizer stations.

Pet care plan

Homes should develop a pet care plan outlining responsibilities for feeding, exercise, cage or litter box cleaning, daily health checks, grooming, bathing, and nail care. The plan should also specify where the animal is permitted within the home. Resident animals must be kept in a designated area and housed in an appropriate enclosure rather than allowed to roam. In addition to the above, the items below should also be considered:

Health Status Documentation	Homes must be able to produce documentation verifying that mammals (dogs, cats, rabbit) have had annual veterinarian check-ups and are healthy and rabies vaccinations are up to date
Veterinary Contact	The veterinarian's contact information and health records should be included and readily available to staff in case of a bite or animal illness
Plan of Care for a Sick Animal	Staff must be able to recognize signs of illness in animals and ensure prompt veterinary care when needed. Sick animals must be removed from the home immediately. For example, if they have vomiting or diarrhea, unexplained coughing or sneezing, unusual or stressed behaviour, or a suspected infectious illness. Staff responsibilities for removing the animal should be clearly defined. Animals may return once symptoms have fully resolved.
Bird Considerations	Birds must always be kept in a cage and should have their wings clipped to limit flight/movement to control bird droppings
Pet Feeding	Animals should be fed only commercially prepared food and treats. Live insects and animals, raw meat and poultry should not be fed to animals to avoid the spread of infectious diseases. Food bowls are designated and washed daily.
Pet Food Storage	Animal food containers and food bags should not be stored on the floor or in areas where human food is stored, prepared, or served
Pet Water Source	Animals should have access to fresh, clean water and must not be allowed to drink out of toilets. Water bowls are designated and washed daily.
Pet Bathing	Animals should be bathed in a utility sink when they are visibly soiled. Animals must not be bathed in a sink used for hand washing

Cleaning surfaces contaminated by animals in the home

- Environmental surfaces contaminated by animal excreta (urine, feces, vomit, saliva) must be cleaned and disinfected by staff wearing gloves and any additional PPE identified through a [point of care risk assessment](#)
- Remove gross contamination with paper towels and discard in the garbage

- Clean the surface with soap and water, then apply a disinfectant according to the manufacturer's instructions
 - Ensure the surface remains wet for the required contact time
 - Use only disinfectants with a valid drug identification number (DIN) and within expiry

Cleaning animal dwellings

- Keep residents away during cleaning — Residents should not be near or involved in cleaning or disinfecting animal dwellings.
- Assign designated staff — Trained staff should regularly clean cages, beds, litter boxes, fish tanks, and bird cages (e.g., weekly) and document the task
- Separate cleaning from resident care — Staff who clean animal areas should not provide direct resident care unless they change PPE/clothing and perform hand hygiene first
- Use PPE and proper cleaning steps — Staff must use PPE, remove gross debris with paper towels, clean with soap and water, then apply disinfectant as directed
- Disinfectants must have a DIN, proper contact time, and not be expired
- Rinse surfaces after drying to remove chemical residue
- Use appropriate sinks — Do not use food preparation or drinking water sinks for animal cleaning; use utility sinks only
- Take extra precautions for birds, fish, and litter boxes — Additional measures are required for specialized enclosures
 - Bird cages must be cleaned regularly to prevent airborne dried droppings; staff should wear an N95 when dust may be generated
 - Fish tanks must prevent aerosolization and be kept away from food areas; dispose of tank water in a utility sink
 - Litter boxes must be cleaned daily with gloves and a scoop; pregnant staff should not handle litter boxes due to toxoplasmosis risk

Cleaning and disinfecting animal enclosures — Sample Procedure

Operators of institutional settings are encouraged to post written procedures and/or a poster to remind staff of proper cleaning and disinfecting procedures.

1. Prepare to clean

- Wash hands and put on gloves and other protective equipment, as needed
- Follow extra precautions for cleaning bird cages (i.e., wear a surgical mask) and keep residents away from cage cleaning area

2. Clean pet items and cage

- Remove pets, bedding, toys, food, and water dishes from the cage
- Dispose of food, droppings, and bedding material in a garbage bag (pregnant persons should not handle litter boxes)
- Clean bowls, toys, and cage surfaces in a utility sink. Do not use kitchen sinks. Use soap and a scrub brush and then rinse with water
- Wash and dry bedding and towels

3. Disinfect pet items and cage

- Apply disinfectant* to surfaces/items that have been cleaned
- Rinse disinfected surfaces/items and dry them
- Clean and disinfect cleaning sink
- Remove gloves and wash hands

4. Re-make your pet's home

- Add new food and fresh water to cleaned bowls
- Return clean bedding and toys to cage
- Complete the pet cleaning log and schedule next cleaning

*The disinfectant chosen should be suitable for use on surfaces or objects in animal dwellings and should have a drug identification number (DIN). Follow manufacturer's instructions for mixing, contact time and application. If bleach is used, please refer to York Region's [Proper Cleaning and Disinfection Practices](#) for low level disinfection. Bleach should remain wet on the surface for ten minutes.

Refer to [Pet Care – Cage and Crate Cleaning Poster](#)

Incidents with animals

- If a resident or staff member is exposed to the saliva of an animal through a bite, scratch, or other injury, animal supervisors must immediately remove the animal from the home and inform home management
- Staff should ensure that the affected area is washed with soap and water, and medical attention should be sought
- Home is responsible for documenting the incident including details and the first aid practices followed
- Pets with a history of biting are excluded from future visits
- **Notification of an incident:**
 - If the incident involves a resident, home should inform the resident's family member(s) about the incident
 - If the incident involves a staff/HCW, the incident should be reported to Occupational Health and Safety, or equivalent if appropriate
- **Home must report all incidents of animal bites and scratches (where exposure to the animal's saliva is a possibility) to York Region Public Health:**
 - Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.: 1-800-361-5653; TYY 1-866-512-6228
 - Report online: Complete the [online form](#)
 - Fax: complete the [Animal Exposure Incident Report](#) and fax the form to 905-898-8277
 - If you are reporting after 4:30 p.m. on weekdays, weekends or holidays: call 1-888-335-0111

This material is provided by York Region Public Health. Please visit york.ca or call Health Connection at 1-866-361-5653 TYY Dial 711.

References

- IPAC Checklist for Animal Presence in Health Care Settings, Public Health Ontario, April 2026
- Interventions Associated with Reduced Loneliness and Social Isolation in Older Adults: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. Hoang P, King JA, Moore S, et al. JAMA Netw Open. 2022 Oct 3;5(10): e2236676
- Guidelines for Animal-assisted Interventions in Health Care Facilities. Lefebvre S, Golab G, Christensen E, et al. AJIC., March 2008; 36(2): 78-85.
- Animals in Healthcare Facilities: Recommendations to Minimize Potential Risks. Murthy R, Bearman G, Brown S, et al. Infection Control & Hospital Epidemiology, May 2015, 36(5):495-516.

Last Updated May 2026