

Tick parasite can be fatal for cats

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A local veterinarian has described the fatal circumstances surrounding a family of domestic cats in Dresden as rare.

“I have only seen one case of this since I have been a vet and that was when I worked in west Kentucky,” Dr. Michelle Westerfeld said during a phone conversation. She is one of the newest animal doctors at Northwest Tennessee Veterinary Services outside of Dresden.

Westerfeld is referring to a situation involving approximately five domestic cats that were brought to the clinic two weeks ago. The animals displayed signs of a high fever and lack of appetite. After one of the cats died shortly after its arrival, Westerfeld said a lab test conducted by Murray State University found the animal had a disease known as cytauxzoonosis. Cytauxzoonosis is a disease caused by a one-celled parasite that infects felines. The parasite attaches to blood cells and cells of internal organs.

Westerfeld described the disease as rare, especially in domesticated cats.

“It has been around for a while, but it is often seen in undomesticated cats such as bobcats,” she commented.

Ticks spread the parasite, especially the American dog tick that is similar in size and appearance to the white-spotted deer tick.

According to www.peteducation.com, the first case was reported in 1976 and only recently reported in Tennessee. Infected cats show signs 1 to 3 weeks after being bitten by an infected tick. Cats will display a high fever and will stop eating as a result of the disease.

The cat often dies within 14 days from the time the symptoms develop, according to the Web site.

Westerfeld said the five cats brought to the clinic were from the same geographic region in a

rural location outside of Dresden. While bobcats are the natural host, domestic cats that are infected with cytaunzoonosis have a low survival rate.

“We are providing supportive treatment with I.V. fluids and anti-protozoal drugs. Because it is not considered a bacterial infection, there are no antibiotics for treatment. We lost the first cat pretty quickly and we will treat the other four and see what happens,” Westerfeld said.

She said a preventative measure for owners to take if they have outdoor domesticated cats is to provide Frontline or a similar anti-flea and tick preventative.

While medicated collars are preventive, Westerfeld said protection from tick bites is only offered around the neck area of the cat.

She also noted that the disease is only seen in cats and the parasite does not affect humans.