



Updated guidance for working around non-domestic felid species during the SARS CoV-2 pandemic

October 29, 2021

Dear Colleagues

Over a year and a half after the first SARS-CoV-2 case was documented in a tiger, there has been a disturbing increase in infections in non-domestic felids. While SARS-CoV-2 remains primarily a disease of humans, we are again reaching out to AZA institutions with felid species to update and remind you of the risk to the cats in your care and provide guidance to help protect your cats. There will also be additional species-specific guidelines coming out from individual SSPs, as appropriate.

In addition to continued reports of natural SARS CoV-2 infections in tigers, lions, puma and snow leopards, there have been recent confirmations in fishing cat and amur leopard cat. Many of the recent cases have been confirmed to be infections with the Delta variant. Recent cases have occurred long since the implementation of COVID19 protocols (including use of masks for all staff) in zoological institutions for working around at-risk species and vaccination of many of our staff. Additionally, we now, unfortunately, have confirmed our first SARS-CoV-2 fatalities in lion and snow leopard.

Similar to what has been seen in humans, the Delta variant of SARS-CoV-2 appears to be more easily transmitted and to cause more serious disease in non-domestic felids. We know that even vaccinated personnel can become infected with and spread the virus even when asymptomatic. Prevention of spread between humans and non-domestic felids remains imperative. The Felid TAG ***strongly recommends*** that each facility review their risk assessment and protocols in light of current and changing human community transmission rates, human infection risk, and this new information about the impact of the Delta variant on felids.

This includes evaluation of:

- PPE management and disinfection protocols:
 - o Well-fitting face masks covering the nose and mouth should be worn at all times when working indoors with felids, training, when preparing diets and enrichment items, and when working outdoors within 6ft of felids, regardless of human vaccination status. Upgrading to approved higher efficacy (not cloth) masks (e.g. multiple-ply surgical masks, N95) should be considered, especially when community levels and overall risk is

high. See this link for approved options:

https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp_part/default.html

- Review of building ventilation to confirm appropriate HVAC function and clean filters should be performed and optimized where feasible.
- Disinfection of frequently contacted surfaces in both keeper and cat spaces, including fomites (food bowls, enrichment items, etc.) is still recommended. Use of gloves when handling items the cats will contact (e.g. food preparation, enrichment items) is recommended.
- Staff access to felids/felid spaces. Limit access, especially close contact, to staff necessary for animal care, safety, and health needs in ways that continue to prioritize both human and animal safety and health. Maintain a log of personnel working with susceptible species for potential contact tracing if needed.
- Proximity to cats both behind the scenes and in public spaces should be evaluated to ensure appropriate distancing, with the addition of barriers as appropriate.
- Vaccination plan for all felids. The Felid TAG supports vaccination of all non-domestic felids with the Zoetis vaccine. Each institution should develop a vaccination plan for implementation once the vaccine is available to each facility. Vaccine efficacy is still being analyzed, but to date there have been no major side effects reported.
- Symptom screening (self-reporting or onsite) program and staff vaccination. This is a disease of humans that can infect cats, so limiting potential for human infection is a priority. See current CDC and local public health guidance. Broad vaccination of staff is strongly encouraged to decrease circulation of the virus.
- Report any concerns, suspect cases, and positive testing results to the Felid TAG veterinary advisors as well as the appropriate SSP veterinary advisors.

It is important to remember that non-domestic felids are susceptible to a wide range of other respiratory pathogens. However, if you have a suspect case, samples from zoo species can be tested at veterinary diagnostic laboratories. Suitable samples include nasal, oral, and oropharyngeal swabs; tracheal wash; bronchoalveolar lavage; and feces. It is imperative that you first contact your state animal health officials to discuss any suspect case/s and to obtain permission to send samples for testing. Additionally, SARS CoV-2 is an OIE reportable disease. As such, any sample that is presumptive positive at a veterinary diagnostic laboratory in the US will automatically be sent to the National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL) for confirmatory testing. If confirmed, NVSL is required to report results to state and federal officials, and the latter are required to report positive results to the OIE. Despite concerns about reporting, we recommend testing suspect cases so that appropriate additional preventative measures can be taken to limit spread among felids, to ensure safety of staff, and to contribute to a better understanding of SARS-CoV-2 in non-domestic felids.

Stay well and safe,

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