

# Keyfacts - Animal management

Indigenous environmental health workers web resource

This section provides key facts about animal management and Indigenous environmental health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander environmental health practitioners. The information is presented in two parts. The first part provides information on the importance of dogs to Indigenous communities, the impact of dog health on human health, and the aims of dog management programs. The second part considers common animal pests found in Indigenous communities, the impact of pests on human health and how pests can be avoided and exterminated. At the end of this section you will find information for specific resources that may relate to your area of interest or expertise.

## Why are dogs and dog health important to Indigenous communities?

Dogs are an important part of most Australian Indigenous communities; however, the importance and role of dogs vary between Indigenous peoples. Dogs provided protection, warmth and companionship, minded children and were hunters. It is also believed that they warned of evil spirits and were the reincarnated form of ancestors. Currently, dogs often live with Indigenous people, sharing bedding and food, and may have close contact with children.

The impact of dog health on human health is a complex issue. While scientific studies have shown that certain dog diseases can affect humans, it is not known if this occurs very often. Anecdotal evidence suggests that healthier dogs reduce the incidence of certain illnesses in humans. There is now strong evidence that dog scabies cannot be transferred to humans.

Even if many illnesses cannot be directly passed from dogs to humans, sick or untrained dogs can pose a risk to human health. Children who have close relationships with puppies are at increased risk of certain diseases because they may play in areas contaminated with dog urine and faeces.

Many people living and working in Indigenous communities feel that improved dog health has led to other improvements in the community. In communities that have undertaken a dog program, there is a sense of pride in the health of their dogs and increased awareness of health issues in the community.

## What social and health problems do dogs contribute to?

Health issues:

- increase in skin infections
- more gastric problems (including diarrhoea)
- sick dogs may cause embarrassment or 'shame' to their owners

Environmental issues:

- scavenging dogs may spread garbage, increasing the number of pests and diseases
- dog urine and faeces in the community can cause the spread of disease and lead to poor hygiene conditions
- noise created by dogs

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Safety issues:

- dogs may fight with other dogs
- dogs may attack children or adults, causing injury or death

## What types of dogs are found in Indigenous communities?

There are four main categories of dogs found in communities:

Domesticated dogs:

- have an identifiable owner who takes good care of their dog
- are easy to handle and easy to treat to maintain good health
- are usually in the minority (the goal of dog health programs is to have most community dogs in this category)

Camp dogs:

- have an identifiable owner and live and move around with the owner/family
- are generally unfriendly when handled and timid when approached
- may be easier to treat with oral medications rather than injections
- are the largest group of dogs in the community

Fringe camp dogs:

- appear to have no owner and no home
- scavenge food
- fight with other dogs
- are very timid and cannot be handled or treated for health problems

Dingoes/wild dogs:

- live in the bush
- scavenge for food at camp sites
- mate with community dogs, resulting in many crossbred puppies

## What is a dog program?

A dog program is designed to improve the health and wellbeing of all four categories of dogs and the general community. The program must be shaped by the community and include qualified veterinary staff.

Dog programs aim to:

- reduce the amount of parasites, mange and gastrointestinal problems of dogs

- remove dogs that are severely injured or unwanted
- control the community's dog population (the number of dogs may increase as the dogs' health improve because healthy dogs breed more)
- provide dog health education to community members

Things to consider when setting up a dog health program include:

- understanding and complying with community needs and wishes
- ensuring the community understands the program (including issues like euthanasia, sterilisation)
- having enough administrative determination to deal with setting up the program and dealing with problems as they arise
- obtaining funding
- having enough funding, support, and resources to ensure the program is on-going and the dog health treatments are continued;
- using qualified veterinary staff in the program
- overall cost of the program (which varies greatly from community to community).

## What are pests?

Pests are any animal or insect that has a negative effect on human health or wellbeing, where people live or what they eat. Pests can carry diseases, germs and parasites, and may also damage stored food, clothing or shelter.

## What pests are common in communities?

There are many pests around Australia. The most common pests found in Indigenous communities are:

- Flies (bush flies and house flies)
- Cockroaches
- Mosquitoes
- Fleas
- Mites
- Rodents (for example, rats and mice)

## Why are pests a problem?

Pests can carry many diseases on their bodies. Pests like cockroaches, flies and rodents carry diseases including salmonellosis, shigellosis, Hepatitis A and gastroenteritis which cause gastrointestinal

(stomach) problems like diarrhoea and vomiting. These diseases can be transferred when a pest contacts food or cooking items (pots, pans, cutlery, etc) that people use. When they land or touch the food or cooking item, the germs on their bodies may be transferred to it and contaminate it. When people eat the contaminated food or use the contaminated cooking items, they can get sick.

Flies also help spread a serious eye disease called trachoma which is common in some Indigenous communities. Flies are attracted to the salt found in tears and the moisture in eyes. When a fly touches the eye of someone who is infected with trachoma, it can spread the disease by touching the eye of another person who does not have trachoma.

Rodents carry germs that cause leptospirosis which causes a sickness like the flu, but can be very severe if it affects the lungs or kidneys. Leptospirosis is transmitted through infected water, mud or urine that comes in contact with a person's eyes, nose, or cuts in the skin. Rats also transmit rat-bite fever which is also transmitted through their urine or biting.

Mosquito bites can transmit viral diseases like Ross River fever, Murray Valley encephalitis and dengue fever (Qld only) and may get infected if they are scratched.

## What conditions attract pests?

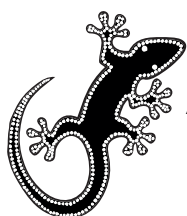
- Flies: flies lay their eggs in moist organic matter like rubbish, food scraps, bodies of dead animals and faeces. They are attracted to open septic tanks, open leach drains, under eaves, dirty bench tops and tables, and lawn clippings.
- Cockroaches: cockroaches like warm and dark places (behind stove, fridges and washing machines, in drains, bathroom or kitchen cupboards, septic tanks, leach drains). They are attracted by rubbish, food scraps and dirty bench tops and tables.
- Mosquitoes: need to breed in cool, dark, damp places where still water can collect (discarded refrigerators, car tyres, tins, septic tanks, leach drains, water storage tanks, effluent ponds and natural bodies of still water).
- Fleas: fleas like sandy areas and need blood to breed. They are commonly found on animals like dogs and cats, but will also infest people when they are moving from place to place.
- Mites: mites live and breed on people and animals.
- Rodents: rodents (for example, rats and mice) are attracted by sources of food like rubbish, food scraps and food storage containers that are not well sealed. They live in places like kitchen cupboards, holes in walls and ceilings, pipes, house insulation, under buildings, and outside in gardens and trees.

## How do you control or get rid of pests?

- keep the environment clean and make sure all food is safe (wrap food scraps well, clean all bench tops and tables, wipe tops and bottoms of food shelves, secure rubbish bin lids, keep toilet clean, make sure lids are sealed on septic tanks and leach drains, clean up after pets)
- seal up cracks and holes so cockroaches and mice have nowhere to hide or live
- keep the environment free of still/stagnant water where mosquitoes can breed
- make sure houses are well sealed so rodents cannot get in, including using flywire on doors and windows
- consider using traps and poison baits, but be sure to always follow the instructions properly.

## References

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## Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet

The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet is an innovative Internet resource that contributes to 'closing the gap' in health between Indigenous and other Australians by informing practice and policy in Indigenous health.

Two concepts underpin the HealthInfoNet's work. The first is evidence-informed decision-making, whereby practitioners and policy-makers have access to the best available research and other information. This concept is linked with that of translational research (TR), which involves making research and other information available in a form that has immediate, practical utility. Implementation of these two concepts involves synthesis, exchange and ethical application of knowledge through ongoing interaction with key stakeholders.

The HealthInfoNet's work in TR at a population-health level, in which it is at the forefront internationally, addresses the knowledge needs of a wide range of potential users, including policy-makers, health service providers, program managers, clinicians, Indigenous health workers, and other health professionals. The HealthInfoNet also provides easy-to-read and summarised material for students and the general community.

The HealthInfoNet encourages and supports information-sharing among practitioners, policy-makers and others working to improve Indigenous health – its free on line yarning places enable people across the country to share information, knowledge and experience. The HealthInfoNet is funded mainly by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing. Its award-winning web resource ([www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au](http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au)) is free and available to everyone.

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