

Canine babesiosis outbreak in UK under control—but needs monitoring

August 18 2016

Scientists at the University of Liverpool are using the health records of dogs to monitor the status of a potentially fatal tick-borne disease that appears to have been imported into the UK.

Canine babesiosis is transmitted to dogs by infected ticks, with symptoms including a lack of appetite, fever and jaundice. Although normally only found in mainland Europe, in February 2016 three [cases](#) of *Babesia* were reported at one Essex veterinary practice in dogs that had not travelled abroad.

The outbreak was widely reported in the national media, with concern raised that the disease could soon affect dogs elsewhere in the country.

Data analysis

A team from the Small Animal Veterinary Surveillance Network (SAVSNET), which is as a partnership between the University of Liverpool and the British Small Animal Veterinary Association, used electronic [health records](#) and laboratory data to assess the risk of this emerging disease in the UK.

Using data from 2015, they analysed cases of reported [tick bites](#) and *Babesia* in [dogs](#) from 392 volunteer [veterinary](#) premises across the UK.

Published in the *Veterinary Record*, the analysis revealed a low

background level of *Babesia* infection in the UK. Based on the sporadic and geographically distributed nature, these cases were most likely linked to overseas travel.

The laboratory data also confirmed a small cluster of eight *Babesia* cases in the Chelmsford area of Essex, where the reported outbreak was centred. The clustering of these cases was consistent with exposure to a local infected tick population.

No new cases

Since March this year, SAVSNET has seen no new diagnoses of *Babesia* in Chelmsford, suggesting that the outbreak may be currently under control.

Dr Alan Radford, SAVSNET academic lead, said: "While this is positive news, we would like to remind vets to keep *Babesia* in mind, especially in practices close to the outbreak where infected ticks are likely to still be active, and persist in the coming years. Currently this seems to be a rare disease but one that we need to keep an eye on.

"One striking finding from our analysis is that ticks remain active in winter, albeit at presumably low levels. It's therefore important that we continue to monitor tick activity, and we would encourage vets and nurses across the UK to keep recording information about tick bites they treat."

Real-time monitoring

Real-time updates of *Babesia* cases and other important diseases, based on data submitted to SAVSNET, are now available to view as an interactive map on the SAVSNET website.

Dr Fernando Sánchez-Vizcaíno, lead author on the paper concluded: "We've shown that health informatics surveillance can help provide real-time local updates on important and emerging pathogens, such as *Babesia*. This could help monitor the response to outbreaks, and in the future contribute to their early detection."

More information: F. Sánchez-Vizcaíno et al, Canine babesiosis and tick activity monitored using companion animal electronic health records in the UK, *Veterinary Record* (2016). [DOI: 10.1136/vr.103908](https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.103908)

Provided by University of Liverpool

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