



Canine Ehrlichiosis – important information if you are travelling to northern Australia with a dog

Canine ehrlichiosis was first detected in Australia in 2020 but is now endemic and spreading across the country's north. The rapid spread of canine ehrlichiosis since it was first detected in northern Western Australia means it has now become well established in the northern regions of Western Australia and South Australia, all of the Northern Territory and north-western Queensland.

Surveillance data from early 2026 indicates a continued expansion of reported cases across Queensland, with affected regions including Mount Isa, Townsville and the Carpentaria region.

With warming climatic conditions, there is concern that the tick's range - and therefore the disease risk - may continue to extend further south.

On 18 June 2021 the first case of ehrlichiosis in Victoria was detected. The infected dog lived in the Wimmera and originated from the Northern Territory.

On rare occasions, humans may become infected with Ehrlichia through the bite from an infected tick. Infected dogs cannot directly transmit infection to people or directly to other dogs.

Ehrlichiosis is caused by the bacterium Ehrlichia canis and is transmitted by infected brown dog ticks. Brown dog ticks can be found in backyards, kennels, under buildings, inside homes and in the bush. It is a tick that loves warm weather and can withstand drought and floods. It can complete its life cycle indoors allowing infestations to persist even in cooler or urban regions.

When the disease first arrived in Australia it was notifiable, so if a veterinarian suspected that a dog had ehrlichiosis they had to report it, meaning initial case numbers were tracked. Now at endemic status, ehrlichiosis does not have to be reported so the true prevalence is unknown. Ehrlichiosis is a potentially deadly tick-borne disease that attacks a dog's immune system.



Brown Dog Tick (*Rhipicephalus sanguineus*)



Larva



Nymph



Adult Male



Adult Female



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Brown dog ticks live in areas north of the dotted line.
(Supplied: Biosecurity Tasmania)

Prevention

With no available vaccine, prevention is vital. If ticks are able to attach and bite the dog, they could already be spreading the disease, so repellents are a much more effective way to stop the spread from occurring. Transmission from the brown dog tick happens quickly so it is recommended that you use a preventative collar in combination with oral tick medication. Repellent collars will kill and repel the tick before it bites and transmits the disease.

Symptoms

Ehrlichiosis is rapidly transmitted when an infected brown dog tick bites a dog. Once an infected tick attaches and starts feeding Ehrlichia can enter the bloodstream in as little as 3 hours.

Early symptoms can often be subtle – a dog may seem tired, lose interest in food or develop a mild fever. As infection progresses signs may include cloudy eyes,

enlarged lymph nodes, bleeding from the nose, under-skin bleeding and rapid weight loss. A few dogs will die in the early stage. Some dogs will recover and others develop a chronic infection and will appear to be well but can relapse months or even years later.

In the terminal phase, most dogs will die, even with treatment. Symptoms include uncontrollable bleeding.

Treatment

In the early stages after a dog has been infected, treatment in the form of targeted antibiotics is available. Antibiotics needs to be administered as early as possible, recovery can be slow and relapses are possible.

If you suspect your dog's a little bit unwell during or after travel to northern Australia talk to your veterinarian straight away because they're going to have a much better chance of survival if diagnosed early.

When visiting northern Australia:

- Be particularly vigilant when in tick-infested environments and where there are congregations of dogs (shows/trials) which may be carrying ticks. This includes places where you may stop at, like fuel stations and caravan parks.
- Check your dog regularly for ticks.
 - Run your fingers through your dog's coat over their skin and feel for abnormal bumps. Pay particular attention to the head and neck, inside their ears, on their chest, between their toes and around their mouths and gums.
- Use a tick repellent product on all dogs. Repellent tick collars and spot-ons provide the best primary protection, in combination with tablets and chews registered for brown dog tick control. Your veterinarian can provide advice about appropriate product use and dose frequency.
- Treat confirmed or potentially infected dogs with registered systemic tick control products for life, even if no ticks are visible on the dog. This will help prevent the disease spreading to other regions.