

Frequently Asked Questions about Morbillivirus and Recent Dolphin Deaths in Virginia

What is causing the unusual death of dolphins in Virginia?

Based upon preliminary tests and research by disease experts, the tentative cause of these deaths along the Mid-Atlantic coast, including Virginia, is cetacean morbillivirus.

What is morbillivirus?

Morbillivirus is a genus of the family *Paramyxoviridae*. There are various kinds of morbillivirus and they differ among species. Specific morbilliviruses cause measles (in people), canine distemper (in dogs, coyotes, wolves, and seals), rinderpest (in cattle), and peste-des-petits-ruminants (goats and sheep). A morbillivirus has recently been associated with kidney disease in cats. Five types of morbilliviruses have been detected in marine mammals in the United States: canine distemper virus (CDV) and phocine distemper virus (PDV) in seals and sea otters, and dolphin morbillivirus (DMV) and pilot whale morbillivirus (PWMV), and Longman's beaked whale morbillivirus (LBWMV), which are collectively referred to as cetacean morbillivirus (CMV) in porpoises, dolphins and whales.

How long has cetacean morbillivirus been around?

Cetacean morbillivirus was first detected in the late 1980s through the early 1990s in wild dolphins when outbreaks occurred in the Mid-Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea.

Has morbillivirus ever been found in dolphins in Virginia before?

Yes, morbillivirus was detected in dolphins in the 1987-1988 bottlenose dolphin die-off. This event took place along the Atlantic Coast and spanned the region from New Jersey to Florida affecting over 700 dolphins. Dolphins from that die-off showed similar lesions to what is currently being seen. The cause of the 1987-88 event was determined to be morbillivirus infection.

What is the risk to humans from this virus?

The likelihood of dolphin to human transmission of cetacean morbillivirus is extremely low. Morbilliviruses do not tend to spread from one species to another.

What should I do if I see a marine mammal on the beach?

Since dolphins can have secondary infections that can be passed to people, do not approach or touch the animal. Keep your pets away from the animal as well. Remember these are wild animals, so for both your safety and theirs please keep a safe distance. Dolphins, like other marine mammals (whales, porpoises, seals and sea lions), are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Only trained marine mammal responders should handle the animal. If you see a marine mammal on any of Virginia's beaches, contact the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center at 757-385-7576. If outside Virginia, contact your local Marine Mammal Stranding Network:

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/networks.htm>

What should I do to protect myself and my pets against this virus?

You should never approach or allow a pet to approach a live or dead marine mammal. Pets should be kept away from marine mammals. Based on current knowledge, cetacean morbillivirus does not appear to infect pets but the dolphins may have other secondary diseases that can pose risks to pets. Decomposing tissue may also contain bacteria and viruses that can be a risk to you and your pets. In addition, dogs can share infectious diseases with marine mammals and should not be allowed to approach these animals on the beach whether they are alive or dead. Neither pets nor people should consume bones, tissues, or any other body parts of marine mammals. Contact your veterinarian to discuss the potential risk to pets in your local area.

Does eating seafood pose a risk?

Cetacean morbilliviruses are not known to cause disease in fish or shellfish, and there are no documented cases of cetacean morbillivirus in fish or shellfish.

Where can I go for more information?

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/mmume/midatltdolphins2013.html>