

# The Canine Distemper Virus



## What is Canine Distemper Virus?

Canine Distemper is a highly contagious viral infection of dogs. It is easily spread and can cause serious, sometimes fatal, illness. There is a highly effective vaccine available against the canine distemper virus to protect your dog from this serious disease.

## Who Gets It?

Unvaccinated or incompletely vaccinated dogs are most at risk of infection. Puppies are at higher risk of infection and of developing severe disease, but adult dogs can become sick as well.

## How is it Spread?

Distemper is transmitted from dog to dog by exposure to infected bodily fluids: saliva, urine, feces and nasal discharge. When an infected dog coughs, virus particles are released into the air and may infect another dog that breathes in the contaminated air. Exposure to infected urine or feces or other bodily excretions may also cause infection.

## What are the Symptoms?

- The canine distemper virus can cause a wide variety of symptoms and may affect the respiratory tract, gastrointestinal system, skin, reproductive tract, eyes, and nervous system.
- Early signs can be indistinguishable from other common contagious diseases, such as kennel cough, and include ocular and nasal discharge, transient fever, and decreased appetite.
- Dogs may also develop a cough and/or pneumonia with or without vomiting, diarrhea, and weight loss.
- Some dogs will develop neurologic problems characterized by tremors, weakness, imbalance,

and seizures. These can also occur after a dog seems to have recovered from the initial phase of disease. Recover is possible, but neurologic damage may be permanent or even fatal.

## How is it Diagnosed?

It may be a few weeks following exposure to the virus before a dog develops symptoms. Distemper should be suspect in a dog with a consistent history and clinical signs and an incomplete or unknown vaccination history, but confirmation of the diagnosis is challenging. Blood or tissue samples may be collected for laboratory analysis to look for antibodies or pieces of the virus, and in some cases cerebrospinal fluid may need to collect by spinal tap.

## What is the Treatment?

There is no definitive treatment for distemper virus infections. Supportive care to address symptoms and secondary infections is critical, but recovery from infection requires the dog to successfully mount an immune response. Intravenous fluids, anti-nauseous medications, antibiotics, and even airway dilators may all be needed. Distemper can cause a wide variety of symptoms, ranging in intensity from mild to extremely severe, and recovery is variable. Infections may be fatal even with aggressive therapy, and dogs that recover may have permanent damage from the infection. Neurologic distemper is particularly difficult to treat and carries a guarded prognosis.

## How Do I Prevent It?

- There is excellent vaccine available to protect dogs and puppies against distemper virus, and generally all dogs should receive this critical vaccination even if they do not come into contact with other dogs.

- Incompletely vaccinated dogs, especially puppies, should be kept away from unvaccinated animals until they have received all their shots.
- Puppies need a series of vaccinations beginning at six weeks of age, and continuing every three to four weeks until the puppy is 16-18 weeks of age. Adult dogs usually need an initial series of two vaccinations given three to four weeks apart. Booster vaccinations should be given on a regular basis following this initial series as recommended by your veterinarian.
- Be aware of your pet's behavior and normal habits. If he or she shows any symptoms, bring him to a veterinarian immediately.
- Practice basic wellness and bring your pet to a veterinarian for a yearly exam.

## How Do I Clean an Infected Area?

The canine distemper virus, outside the body, can be destroyed with heat, desiccation (drying), or chemical disinfectants. Routine cleaning and disinfection procedures are effective in destroying distemper on hard, non-porous surfaces and inanimate objects. Speak to your veterinarian for specific recommendations on how to clean an infected area before allowing your dog or another dog to come in contact with that environment.



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