

Canine Distemper

Canine Distemper is an easily preventable but highly contagious disease caused by a virus that attacks the respiratory, gastrointestinal and nervous system of dogs and puppies. The virus also infects foxes, wolves, coyotes, raccoons, skunks and ferrets. It is possible for humans to contract an asymptomatic (lacking symptoms) Canine Distemper Virus. Anyone who has been immunized against measles, though, is protected against Distemper as well.

Canine Distemper is spread through all infected body excretions and secretions but primarily through airborne virus exposure. The contagious virus is shed for several weeks during the illness and subsequent recovery period. While not particularly stable outside a host, the virus usually survives for several weeks in the environment.

All puppies younger than four months old and all dogs not vaccinated against Canine Distemper are at risk of acquiring the disease. Distemper is incurable and is often fatal. Even if a dog survives the disease, Distemper can permanently damage a dog's nervous system.

The earliest symptom of Distemper is a watery to pus-like eye discharge. Dogs will then develop fever, nasal discharge, coughing, lethargy, reduced appetite, vomiting and diarrhea. Later stage symptoms include seizures, behavior changes, walking in circles, appearing to chew gum, twitching, partial or complete paralysis and the nose and/or footpads may harden. Sometimes a lack of appetite or mild depression is the only sign of onset of the virus. It is not uncommon for dogs to have some but not all of the signs associated with Distemper.

Signs may not appear for 10-14 days after infection. Clinical appearances and laboratory tests diagnose Canine Distemper. There is no treatment available to kill the virus once a dog has been infected. Treatment efforts prevent secondary infections, control vomiting, diarrhea or neurological symptoms and fight dehydration.

Prevention of Canine Distemper is through vaccination against Canine Distemper and avoiding contact with infected animals. Puppies are susceptible as the mother's milk immunity wears off and their immune systems become mature enough to ward off infection. Concerns have arisen over the possibility that the immunity in mother's milk may interfere with effective vaccination. To defend against Canine Distemper during the first few months of life, a series of vaccinations are required. Until your puppy has received the complete series of vaccinations, you should use caution exposing your puppy to other animals.

To protect an adult dog, consult your veterinarian about a recommended vaccination schedule for your pet.