

Distemper in Dogs

What is distemper?

Distemper is a highly contagious viral disease of domestic dogs and other animals such as ferrets, skunks and raccoons. It is an incurable, often fatal, multisystemic disease that affects the respiratory, gastrointestinal, and central nervous systems. Distemper is caused by the *canine distemper virus* (CDV).



How is the disease spread?

The disease is spread mainly by direct contact between a susceptible dog and a dog showing symptoms. Coughing and sneezing can spread the virus over short distances.

What are the clinical signs?

As with all infectious diseases, clinical signs can vary. The main clinical signs are diarrhea, vomiting, a thick yellow discharge from the eyes and nose, cough and, in severe cases, seizures and neurological signs. Dogs that recover from the disease are often left with persistent nervous muscular twitches (*chorea*) and recurrent seizures.

Are there other diseases causing similar signs?

There are many diseases that cause diarrhea and vomiting, several that cause similar respiratory and neurological signs, but few diseases that cause all of these at the same time.

What is the treatment?

As with most viral infections, there is no specific treatment. Antibiotics are not effective against viruses, but do help in controlling the secondary bacterial infections that often occur with distemper. The treatment for distemper is aimed at helping reduce the intensity of signs and symptoms. This is accomplished with hospitalization to provide the patient with intensive nursing care, intravenous fluid therapy and symptomatic treatment for the vomiting, diarrhea, cough, etc. Anti-seizure and anti-inflammatory medications may be required in some cases.

How can I prevent my dog from becoming infected?

Fortunately we have highly effective vaccines to prevent this deadly disease. These vaccines are given to puppies along with other routine vaccines. After the initial puppy vaccine boosters, additional distemper vaccine boosters should be given to adult dogs. Your veterinarian will help you determine how often your dog should receive booster vaccine. Recently, some distemper vaccines have become approved for a three-year booster interval, meaning that they are only required every three years.

How common is distemper?

"Because of the widespread use of successful vaccines, it is much less common than it was in the 1970's."

Canine distemper is seen worldwide but because of the widespread use of successful vaccines, it is much less common than it was in the 1970's. It is still seen in populations where vaccination rates are low and in stray dogs. The virus may persist in recovered carrier dogs and in wildlife such as skunks and raccoons. It is essential to keep vaccinating our dog population to prevent canine distemper from returning as a major killer of dogs.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM

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