

Distemper

Canine Distemper is a serious viral disease. Widespread vaccination has reduced its incidence, but dogs that get it often die. Canine distemper can also infect pet ferrets.

How Dogs Get the Virus

Susceptible dogs are infected by inhaling the Distemper virus, which is found in secretions and feces from infected dogs. Puppies under six months of age and unvaccinated dogs are most vulnerable.

What the Disease Does

Canine Distemper infects the immune cells and spreads throughout the body via the lymph and the blood. The immune system is weakened, making the dog susceptible to other infections. The virus also directly attacks some tissues, particularly the nervous system. Signs of distemper include fever, cough, nasal and eye discharge that is usually thick and green, pneumonia, loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, dehydration, thickening of the toe pads, muscle twitching, seizures and blindness.

How Canine Distemper is Diagnosed

Often veterinarians can diagnose Distemper by taking a careful medical history and performing a thorough physical exam. Laboratory tests are available to confirm the diagnosis.

Treatment for Canine Distemper

There is no specific treatment that kills the virus, but sick dogs are hospitalized and treated for secondary infections and to reduce the symptoms. The disease is fatal in approximately 50-90% of cases. Survivors often suffer permanent nervous system damage. Seizures or other nervous system problems may occur even years later.

Preventing Canine Distemper

The key to preventing Canine Distemper is a good vaccination program. Puppies should be vaccinated starting at 6-8 weeks of age. Sometimes, young puppies are vaccinated with measles, a related virus that also protects against Distemper. Distemper vaccines are repeated every 3-4 weeks until the puppy is at least 16 weeks old. After that, boosters are given every 1-3 years depending on the type of vaccine. It's especially important for female dogs intended for breeding to be current on vaccinations. This allows them to provide immunity that protects their puppies until they are old enough to receive vaccinations.

Adult dogs that have never been vaccinated before may only need a single vaccination, followed by re-vaccination every 1-3 years. Check with your veterinarian to find out the best vaccination protocol for your dog.

Dogs with distemper should be isolated from other dogs since the disease is contagious. Fortunately, the virus is killed by most household disinfectants.