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CANINE DISTEMPER

What is distemper?

Distemper is a highly contagious viral disease of domestic dogs and other animals such as ferrets, skunks and raccoons. It is a contagious, incurable, often fatal, multisystemic viral 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 eventually seizures and neurological signs. Dogs that recover from the disease are often left with persistent nervous muscle 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 signs and symptoms. This is accomplished with hospitalization providing rest and intensive nursing care, intravenous fluid therapy and symptomatic treatment for the vomiting, diarrhea, cough, etc.

How can I prevent my dog from becoming infected?

Fortunately we have highly effective vaccines to use. These are given to puppies along with other routine vaccines. Although in the majority of dogs the protection from initial vaccination may last more than a year, annual revaccination may be recommended because some dogs may be at higher risk for contracting the disease.

How common is distemper?

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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