

Canine Distemper

**What is distemper?**

Distemper is a highly contagious viral disease of domestic dogs. Some other species, including ferrets, skunks and raccoons, are also affected by this disease.

**How is the disease spread?**

The virus is spread primarily by direct contact between a susceptible dog and a dog with the disease. Coughing can spread the virus over short distances. Discharge from the nose is heavily laden with the virus.

**What are the clinical signs?**

As with many infections, symptoms can vary from one dog to another. The most common signs are fever, loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, coughing, seizures and thick, yellow discharge from the nose and eyes.

**Do other diseases cause similar signs?**

There are many diseases that cause coughing, fever, diarrhea, loss of appetite or seizures. However, this combination is unique to canine distemper. If the diagnosis is in doubt, a diagnostic test can be performed for confirmation.

**What is the treatment?**

As with most viral infections, there is no drug that will kill the virus. Antibiotics are used because many secondary bacterial infections occur. Intravenous fluids, cough suppressants and drugs to control seizures may also be used. Intensive nursing care is essential. This is best accomplished by treating the dog in the hospital.

**Do dogs completely recover from this disease?**

Usually, but not always. Some may be left with persistent nervous twitches (myoclonus) and recurrent seizures.

**How can I prevent my dog from becoming infected?**

A very effective vaccine is available to protect dogs against distemper. It is given to puppies (starting as early as six weeks of age) in a series of three to five injections. Annual re-vaccination is strongly recommended.

**How common is distemper?**

Distemper is a worldwide disease. Fortunately, vaccines have been very effective in reducing its incidence in dogs that are healthy and well cared for. However, stray dogs can be a source of the virus, as can skunks, ferrets and raccoons.