

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 (affecting multiple organs) disease that affects the respiratory, gastrointestinal, and central nervous systems. Distemper is caused by the canine distemper virus (CDV).

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



What are the clinical signs of distemper?

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

Many diseases cause diarrhea and vomiting, and several cause similar respiratory and neurological signs, but few diseases cause all these problems simultaneously.

How is distemper treated?

As with most viral infections, there is no specific treatment for distemper. Antibiotics (e.g., amoxicillin, ampicillin, or doxycycline) are not effective against viruses but help control the secondary bacterial infections that often occur with distemper. The treatment for distemper is aimed at reducing 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 medications (e.g., diazepam or phenobarbital) may be required in some cases.

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How can I prevent my dog from becoming infected?

Fortunately, there are highly effective vaccines to protect dogs from this deadly disease. These vaccines are given to puppies with other routine vaccines at 8, 12, and 16 weeks of age. After the initial puppy vaccine boosters, additional distemper boosters should be given to adult dogs every one or three years, depending on which vaccine is used. Your veterinarian will help you determine how often your dog should receive the booster vaccine.

Vaccine titers can also be done to see if an adequate immunity level is present, but it is often more costly than vaccinating. If titers show an inadequate level, vaccination is still recommended.

How common is distemper?

Canine distemper is seen worldwide, but because of the widespread use of vaccines, it is much less common than in the 1970s. It is still seen in populations with low vaccination rates and stray dogs. The virus may persist in recovered carrier dogs and 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.

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