

Canine Distemper

- Canine distemper is a serious, contagious disease with a death rate that can reach 50%.
- Canine distemper attacks the respiratory, stomach/intestinal, and brain/nervous systems of dogs.
- Canine distemper is spread through contact with body fluids such as saliva and respiratory droplets.
- There is no effective treatment for canine distemper; however, supportive care can be given, and vaccination is recommended for prevention of disease due to canine distemper virus (CDV).
- Every dog should be vaccinated against CDV.

What Is It?

Canine distemper is a serious contagious disease caused by canine distemper virus (CDV), which attacks the respiratory, stomach/intestinal, and brain/nervous systems of dogs. It can also infect ferrets and many wild animals, including raccoons, skunks, minks, weasels, foxes, and coyotes. The death rate can reach 50%, and animals that do recover are often left with permanent disabilities. There is no effective treatment, but virus-associated disease is largely preventable through vaccination.

While the disease is less common than it was before the first effective vaccines became available in the 1960s, it is still present in wildlife populations that might have contact with domestic animals.

The incubation period of CDV is typically 1 to 2 weeks but can last up to 5 weeks. CDV is shed (spread) through all body secretions. It can also be carried on the hands and feet. Warm, dry, or sunny conditions will kill CDV, but it is resistant to cold and can survive in near-freezing, shady environments.

Signs of Distemper

The first sign in infected dogs typically is a watery or pus-like eye discharge. Additional initial signs include:

- Fever
- Nasal discharge
- Coughing

- Lethargy (tiredness)
- Reduced appetite
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea

In later stages, the disease affects the brain and nerves, and dogs may show the following signs:

- Twitching, or “chewing gum” fits, in which repetitive twitching of the dog’s jaw appears as if the dog is chewing gum
- Seizures
- Agitated behavior
- Paralysis

Prevention

Because of the importance of canine distemper and its severity, the CDV vaccine is considered a “core” vaccine by organized veterinary medicine, meaning that all dogs should be protected from this disease. Vaccination is the most effective way to prevent illness and death associated with CDV infection. The CDV vaccine is typically given in a combination vaccine that also protects against other serious diseases, such as canine parvovirus and canine adenovirus-2 infections.

There is no effective treatment for canine distemper; however, supportive care can be given, and vaccination is recommended for prevention of disease due to canine distemper virus.

Your veterinarian will advise you of what vaccination schedule you should follow for your pet, but in general, all puppies should receive the CDV vaccine every 3 to 4 weeks between the ages of 6 and 16 weeks, followed by a booster 1 year after the last dose. Thereafter,

Common Conditions

booster vaccinations are typically recommended every 1 to 3 years.

It is important to remember that a vaccination, even a routine one like a CDV vaccine, is a medical procedure, and you should follow your veterinarian's instructions on how to monitor your pet for signs of a reaction. Vaccine reactions are rare, but knowing the associated signs is important.

Other forms of prevention include the following:

- Keep puppies away from other dogs until the puppy vaccination series is complete (16 weeks).
- Avoid unvaccinated and sick animals.
- Keep your pet away from wildlife and stray animals.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Diagnosis of CDV infection is difficult because there are few reliable tests for the disease and, in the initial stages, clinical signs can mimic those of other conditions, such as kennel cough. Diagnosis is generally based on clinical signs.

Treatment is limited to supportive care: providing fluids, administering medications to reduce vomiting and diarrhea, and administering antibiotics to prevent subsequent infections, such as pneumonia.

Caution: Some of the clinical signs of both rabies and canine distemper can be similar, so use caution when handling sick animals.