

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 to a susceptible dog from a dog with the disease. Coughing can spread the virus over short distances. The discharge from the nose is heavily laden with the virus.

What are the clinical signs?

As with many infections, the clinical signs can vary from one dog to the next. The main signs are fever, loss of appetite, a thick yellow discharge from the nose and eyes, coughing, and seizures.

Are there other diseases causing similar signs?

There are many diseases that cause coughing, fever, loss of appetite, or seizures. However, this combination is unique to canine distemper. If the diagnosis is in doubt, a blood 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 be used. Intensive nursing care is essential. This is best accomplished with the dog in the hospital.

Do dogs recover completely from this disease?

Usually, but not always. Some may be left with persistent nervous twitches (chorea) 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, as young as 5 weeks of age, in a series of 3-5 injections. Annual revaccination is strongly recommended.

How common is distemper?

Distemper is a world-wide disease. Fortunately, vaccines have been very effective in reducing its incidence to very low levels in well cared-for dogs. However, stray dogs can be a source of the virus, as can skunks, ferrets, and raccoons.