



Mason County PAWS Humane Society
Mason County, Michigan

CANINE DISTEMPER

WHAT IS CANINE DISTEMPER?

Canine distemper is a highly contagious viral disease of dogs and wildlife such as foxes, wolves, coyotes, racoons, skunks, mink and ferrets.

Canine distemper virus is very resistant to cold and the majority of distemper cases in domestic dogs are seen in the fall and winter. In wild animals, since the young are more susceptible to infection, the majority of cases are seen in the spring and summer, but cases are observed year-round.

It is a different disease from feline distemper. Although both these diseases can cause acute illness and death, canine and feline distemper should not be confused, as they are caused by two distinctly different viral agents.

Canine distemper cannot be spread to humans.

HOW DO DOGS GET CANINE DISTEMPER?

Puppies and dogs most often become infected through airborne exposure to the virus from an infected dog through sneezing or coughing. Because canine distemper also impacts wildlife populations, contact between wild animals and domestic dogs can facilitate the spread of the virus.

The virus can also be transmitted by shared food and water bowls and equipment. Infected dogs can shed the virus for months, and mother dogs can pass the virus through the placenta to their puppies.

WHAT ARE THE GENERAL SYMPTOMS OF CANINE DISTEMPER?

Initially, infected dogs will develop watery to pus-like discharge from their eyes. They then develop fever, nasal discharge, coughing, lethargy, reduced appetite, and vomiting. As the virus attacks the nervous system, infected dogs develop circling behavior, head tilt, muscle twitches, convulsions with jaw chewing movements and salivation (“chewing gum fits”), seizures, and partial or complete paralysis. The virus may also cause the footpads to thicken and harden, leading to its nickname “hard pad disease.”

In wild animals, susceptible to the disease, signs of abnormal behavior and apparent lack of fear, suggestive of rabies, may be the only signs grossly visible.

TREATMENT AND CONTROL

No treatment other than supportive care exists for canine distemper. Because this disease can be fatal, prevention of infection in the first place is key. Distemper vaccination should be part of the standard puppy series of immunizations and boosters. Into adulthood, dogs should be vaccinated annually or every three years, depending on the veterinarian’s recommendations as dogs age. While no vaccine can absolutely, 100% guarantee that a dog will never become ill, this preventative measure is the best line of defense.

Useful links:

https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,4570,7-350-79136_79608_85016-26505--,00.html