



Parvo Virus- A Deadly Canine Enemy

What Is Parvovirus?

Canine parvovirus is a highly contagious viral disease. There are two forms of this virus, one that affects the heart (in very young puppies it can infect the heart muscle and lead to "sudden" death) and another that affects the intestinal tract, and once contracted either form can be fatal.

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of this virus is that the public is so ill informed on its prevalence and hazardous potential. Often, there is a distinct smell that the dog and its excretions will carry. Another major indicator of this infection is its sudden onset. One day your dog will be playing in your yard, and the next it will barely be able to lift its head.

If this happens, do not waste time waiting on symptoms to disappear on their own. The virus attacks the lining of the digestive system. Since the intestinal lining has the biggest concentration of rapidly dividing cells in a puppy's body, the virus attacks and kills these cells so that dogs and puppies cannot absorb the needed nutrients or liquids. It also causes suppression of white blood cells, which come from another group of rapidly dividing cells. It affects puppies much more frequently than adult dogs since they have an immature immune system. Parvo takes 7-10 days from the time of exposure to test positive for this virus and before the dog shows any symptoms.

What Are the General Symptoms of Parvovirus?

The general symptoms of parvovirus are lethargy, severe vomiting, loss of appetite and bloody, foul-smelling diarrhea that can lead to life-threatening dehydration.

How Is Parvovirus Transmitted?

Parvovirus is extremely contagious and can be transmitted by any person, animal or object that comes in contact with an infected dog's feces. Highly resistant, the virus can live in the environment for months, and may survive on inanimate objects such as food bowls, shoes, clothes, carpet and floors. It is common for an unvaccinated dog to contract parvovirus from the streets, especially in urban areas where there are many dogs.

Parvo is NOT an airborne virus, is specific to dogs alone and cannot be transmitted to humans or other pets of a different species, such as cats.

How Is Parvovirus Diagnosed?

Veterinarians diagnose parvovirus on the basis of clinical signs and laboratory testing. The Enzyme Linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA) test has become a common test for parvovirus. The ELISA test kit is used to detect parvovirus in a dog's stools, and is performed in the vet's office in about 15 minutes. Because this test is not 100% sensitive or specific, your veterinarian may recommend additional tests and bloodwork.

Which Dogs Are Prone to Parvovirus?

Puppies, adolescent dogs and canines who are not vaccinated are most susceptible to the virus. The canine parvovirus affects most members of the dog family (wolves, coyotes, foxes, etc.). Breeds at a higher risk are Rottweilers, Doberman pinschers, Labrador retrievers, American Staffordshire terriers and German shepherds.

How Can Parvovirus Be Prevented?

You can protect your dog from this potential killer by making sure he's up-to-date on his vaccinations. Parvovirus should be considered a core vaccine for all puppies and adult dogs. It is usually recommended that puppies be vaccinated with combination vaccines that take into account the risk factors for exposure to various diseases. One common vaccine, called a "5-in-1," protects the puppy from distemper, hepatitis, leptospirosis, parvovirus and parainfluenza.

Generally, the first vaccine is given at 6-8 weeks of age and a booster is given at four-week intervals until the puppy is 16-20 weeks of age, and then again at one year of age. A puppy's vaccination program is not complete before four months of age. Older dogs who have not received full puppy vaccination series may be susceptible to parvovirus and should also receive at least one immunization. Consult with your veterinarian about how often your dog will need to be revaccinated.

Because parvovirus can live in an environment for months, you will want to take extra care if there has been an infected dog in your house or yard. Some things are easier to clean and disinfect than others—and even with excellent cleaning, parvovirus can be difficult to eradicate. Parvo is resistant to many typical disinfectants. A solution of one part bleach to 32 parts water can be used where organic material is not present. The infected dog's toys, food dish and water bowl should be properly cleaned and then disinfected with this solution for 10 minutes. If not disinfected, these articles should be discarded. You can also use the solution on the soles of your shoes if you think you've walked through an infected area. Areas that are harder to clean (grassy areas, carpeting and wood, for example) may need to be sprayed with disinfectant, or even resurfaced.

How Can Parvovirus Be Treated?

Although there are no drugs available that can kill the virus yet, treatment is generally straightforward and consists of aggressive supportive care to control the symptoms and boost your dog's immune system to help him win the battle against this dangerous disease. Dogs infected with parvovirus need intensive treatment in a veterinary hospital, where they receive antibiotics, drugs to control the vomiting, intravenous fluids and other supportive therapies. Should your dog undergo this treatment, be prepared for considerable expense—the average hospital stay is about 5-7 days.

Please note that treatment is not always successful—so it's especially important to make sure your dog is vaccinated.

Dogs who have survived Parvo can get it again. In the case of some puppies, a puppy testing negative for Parvo one day could succumb to the virus within a matter of days. It strikes fast and without mercy.

What Are Some Home Treatment Options?

Because parvovirus is such a serious disease, it is not recommended to attempt home treatment. Even with the best veterinary care, this disease is often fatal.

When Is it Time to See the Vet?

If you notice your dog experiencing severe vomiting, loss of appetite, depression or bloody diarrhea, contact your veterinarian immediately.

Will My Dog Die From Parvo?

This is a very serious disease. Some puppies infected with Parvovirus will die despite prompt and adequate treatment. While no extremely accurate statistics are available, a good guess is probably that 80% of puppies treated for parvovirus will live. Without treatment, probably 80% or more of the infected puppies would die.

Due to the high death rate, Parvovirus gets a lot of free publicity. Many people just assume that any case of diarrhea in a dog is from parvovirus. This is not true. There are a lot of other diseases and disorders that lead to diarrhea. If you have a puppy, don't take any chances. Have your puppy examined by your vet if diarrhea is a factor in any disease. It is better to be safe than to be sorry.

If your dog becomes infected with parvovirus, he has a good chance of survival if treated right away. If he makes it through the first three to four days, he will usually make a rapid recovery, and be back on his feet within a week. It is vital, however, that he receives supportive therapy immediately. It must be stressed that this is not a bad case of doggy flu; without medical treatment, most puppies die.