

Canine Parvovirus

Canine parvovirus (parvo) is highly contagious virus that affects dogs. Your dog becomes infected with parvo either by direct contact with an infected dog or by ingesting the virus through fecal-oral contact. The virus can also be brought into a dog's environment by way of shoes that have come into contact with infected feces. There are two forms of the virus: intestinal and cardiac. The intestinal form is more common and is characterized by profuse vomiting, bloody diarrhea and life-threatening dehydration. In the less common cardiac form, the virus attacks the muscles of the heart, often leading to death. The majority of cases are seen in puppies that are between six weeks and six months old, but any unvaccinated dog is susceptible to the disease. Diseases or drug therapies that suppress the normal response of the immune system may also increase the likelihood of infection.

In a dog infected with parvo, most owners first notice that their dog is lethargic, doesn't want to eat and is losing weight. His/her abdomen (belly) may be painful. Clinical signs then progress to profuse vomiting and/or bloody diarrhea, which quickly leads to life-threatening dehydration. The dehydration is often times more deadly than the virus itself. Some dogs with parvo will run a fever, but many times, due to the severity of the virus, these dogs will be hypothermic (have a low body temperature).

In order to diagnose parvo, your veterinarian will perform a physical exam and take a fecal sample. Most veterinary clinics have an in-house test they can run that will tell you almost immediately whether or not your dog has parvo. Your vet may also recommend blood work, urinalysis, abdominal x-rays and/or abdominal ultrasound.

Treatment for parvovirus can be difficult and costly. Parvo is a virus, so there is not a drug your vet can give to cure the infection. Treatment is focused on alleviating the symptoms of parvo, like dehydration. Your dog needs fluids to

replace those lost by vomiting and diarrhea but, if your pet is vomiting, nothing can be given orally. The best way to treat parvo is to hospitalize your dog for intravenous fluid and nutritional support and injectable medications. Your vet may give anti-emetics to help curb nausea and vomiting or antibiotics for secondary bacterial infections. Your vet can monitor your dog's protein and electrolyte levels, as well as other vital signs, and regulate them as needed.

Prognosis for survival is guarded. Many dogs do recover from parvo with proper treatment, but death may sometimes result from severe dehydration, secondary bacterial infection, bacterial toxins in the bloodstream (septicemia) or intestinal hemorrhage (bleeding). Once your dog does recover, he/she will still be shedding the virus in his/her feces for at least two weeks, if not longer, making him/her a contagion risk to other dogs. Therefore, you will need to isolate your dog for a period of time after recovery. Parvovirus is very resistant to many disinfectants and can survive in the environment for over a year, so make sure to disinfect everything your dog uses (bowls, kennels, toys, etc). A dilute bleach solution (1/2 cup bleach to 1 gallon water) is effective for killing the virus.

Parvovirus is easily preventable with proper vaccination. Puppies require multiple sets of vaccinations in order to be fully protected from diseases like parvo; a single vaccination does not at all ensure immunity. Puppies should not be socialized with other dogs until they have had their complete set of vaccinations. Older dogs with an unknown or improper vaccine history should be vaccinated as well.

Canine parvovirus is a highly contagious, sometimes deadly disease that can affect any dog or puppy. Proper vaccination is key to avoiding infection so talk to your veterinarian to make sure your dog's vaccines are up to date.