



## CANINE DISTEMPER

### What is Canine Distemper?

Canine Distemper is a very serious and often fatal canine disease. It is caused by a highly contagious virus spread through the air from one dog to another. The virus can be shed in all body secretions (urine, stool, saliva, cough aerosol, etc.). It can occur in any age dog, but is seen most often in unvaccinated or incompletely vaccinated puppies from four to eight months old.

### What are the Symptoms of Canine Distemper?

The signs can vary from animal to animal and in the same animal from time to time. The signs can include any combination of: loss of appetite; vomiting; diarrhea; fever; deep cough; discharges from the eyes and nose; depression. In the later stages the nervous system may become involved and we'll see signs of this too (muscle twitching or rhythmic jerking in the face or legs; "chewing gum fits," lameness especially in the rear legs; and full or grand mal seizures). The skin may show pustules and the foot-pads may become hard and rocklike.

**Can My Cat Catch Distemper?** -- No, not from your dog. Cat distemper is a different disease from dog distemper. It is caused by a virus related to dog parvo disease.

**How is It Treated?** -- Since it is caused by a virus, there is no specific treatment that will rid your dog of the virus. Treatment is aimed at the various symptoms we may see. It is largely supportive care while the dog gets rid of the virus. We use antibiotics for the bacterial infections that arise in the weakened dog. Good nutrition is important too—a puppy diet is best. Other medicines may be indicated to treat the eyes, skin or digestive tract.

### What if My Dog Shows Nervous System Signs?

The dog's odds of survival drop to about 50% with the first signs of brain or spinal cord infection. If "clonus" or "chorea" (rhythmic muscle contractions) show in the face or front legs, the dog may survive with these movements becoming permanent (though some leave with time). However, if progressively more frequent and severe seizures or progressive paralysis of the rear legs occurs, the dog has less than a 10% chance of survival.

### Would a Vaccination Against Distemper Help?

Giving a vaccination (even intravenously) has been tried on these sick dogs with little or no indication of benefit. Some research indicates that it may even accelerate the brain and spinal cord injuries if they are brewing.

**How Long Will the Treatment Last?** -- The length of time needed for you to give medicine will vary according to the signs your dog shows. As long as distemper is apparent, we will want you to give medicine. We will need to reexamine your dog weekly to determine the state of its health and adjust the treatment as needed. Since the disease changes with time and with the organ systems infected, we will modify the treatment to meet each challenge. If at any point you have questions, please call rather than waiting for the next appointment.

**Is My Dog Going to Live?** -- Maybe. We doctors have seen dogs with distemper that should have lived and didn't and dogs that should have died that lived. There is no certainty when it comes to distemper. One rule of thumb is that if the nervous system does not become involved, your dog will probably live. We will advise you at each weekly examination on the long term prognosis of your pet. Meanwhile, keep your dog isolated from other dogs that may catch the disease until we declare it "cured."

**What About My Other Dogs?** -- Dogs that are well vaccinated (boosted annually or recently finished the "puppy shots") should be protected. They may do some sneezing or mild coughing, but rarely require treatment. If they develop a greenish nasal discharge, they will need some antibiotics too. Unvaccinated dogs or those needing a booster should be vaccinated at once. The virus does not live long off the dog—a week at the most. Most disinfectants are effective against it, but especially a 1:30 solution of chlorox in water.

### **Notify the doctor if any of the following occur:**

- Your pet acts weak or depressed or loses its appetite.
- Your pet has trouble breathing.
- Your pet has a seizure or "fit."

*Thank you for this opportunity to serve you!*