

*Although this brochure provides basic information about canine distemper, your veterinarian is always your best source of health information. Consult your veterinarian for more information about canine distemper and its prevention.*

## And Now A Note On Your Pet's *General Good Health*

A healthy pet is a happy companion. Your pet's daily well-being requires regular care and close attention to any hint of ill health. The American Veterinary Medical Association suggests that you consult your veterinarian if your pet shows any of the following signs:

- Lumps or swelling
- Reduced or excessive appetite or water intake
- Marked weight loss or gain
- Limping, stiffness, or difficulty getting up or down
- Difficult, discolored, excessive or uncontrolled waste elimination (urine and feces)
- Abnormal discharges from any body opening
- Head shaking, scratching, licking, or coat irregularities
- Changes in behavior or fatigue
- Foul breath or excessive tartar deposits on teeth

*For more information, visit,*  
American Veterinary Medical Association  
[www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org)



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# Canine Distemper



*Brought to you by your veterinarian and the  
American Veterinary Medical Association*



## What is Canine Distemper?

Canine distemper is a highly contagious and serious disease caused by a virus that attacks the respiratory, gastrointestinal, and, often, the nervous systems of puppies and dogs. The virus also infects wild canids (e.g. foxes, wolves, coyotes), raccoons, skunks, and ferrets.

## How is Canine Distemper virus spread?

Puppies and dogs usually become infected through airborne exposure to the virus contained in respiratory secretions of an infected dog or wild animal. Outbreaks of distemper tend to be sporadic. Because canine distemper also affects wildlife populations, contact between wild canids and domestic dogs may facilitate spread of the virus.



## What dogs are at risk?

All dogs are at risk but puppies younger than four months old and dogs that have not been vaccinated against canine distemper are at increased risk of acquiring the disease.

## What are some signs of Canine Distemper?

The first sign of distemper is eye discharge that may appear watery to pus-like. Subsequently, dogs develop fever, nasal discharge, coughing, lethargy, reduced appetite, vomiting, and diarrhea. In later stages, the virus may attack the nervous system, bringing about seizures, twitching, or partial or complete paralysis. Occasionally, the virus may cause footpads to harden. Distemper is often fatal. Even if a dog does not die from the disease, canine distemper virus can cause irreparable damage to a dog's nervous system. Distemper is so serious and the signs so varied that any sick dog should be taken to a veterinarian for an examination and diagnosis.



## How is Canine Distemper diagnosed and treated?

Veterinarians diagnose canine distemper on the basis of clinical appearance and laboratory tests. No specific drug is available that will kill the virus in infected dogs. Treatment consists primarily of efforts to prevent secondary infections; control vomiting, diarrhea, or neurologic symptoms; and combat dehydration through administration of fluids. Ill dogs should be kept warm, receive good nursing care, and be separated from other dogs.

## How is Canine Distemper prevented?

Vaccination and avoiding contact with infected animals are key elements of canine distemper prevention.

Vaccination is important. Young puppies are very susceptible to infection, particularly because the natural immunity provided in their mothers' milk may wear off before the puppies' own immune systems are mature enough to fight off infection. If a puppy is exposed to canine distemper virus during this gap in protection, it may become ill. An additional concern is that immunity provided by a mother's milk may interfere with an effective response to vaccination. This means even vaccinated puppies may occasionally succumb to distemper. To narrow gaps in protection and optimally defend against canine distemper during the first few months of life, a series of vaccinations is administered.



Until a puppy has received its complete series of vaccinations, pet owners should use caution when taking their pet to places where young puppies congregate (e.g. pet shops, parks, puppy classes, obedience classes, doggy daycare, and grooming establishments). Reputable establishments and training programs reduce exposure risk by requiring vaccinations, health examinations, good hygiene, and isolation of ill puppies and dogs.

To protect their adult dogs, pet owners should be sure that their dog's distemper vaccination is up-to-date. Ask your veterinarian about a recommended vaccination program for your canine companion.

Contact with known infected dogs should always be avoided. Similarly, contact with raccoons, foxes, skunks, and other potentially infected wildlife should be discouraged.