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Distemper in Dogs

Canine Distemper in Dogs

Canine distemper is a contagious and serious viral illness with no known cure. The disease affects dogs, and certain species of wildlife, such as raccoons, wolves, foxes, and skunks. The common house pet, the ferret, is also a carrier of this virus. Canine distemper belongs to the *Morbillivirus* class of viruses, and is a relative of the measles virus, which affects humans, the *Rinderpest* virus that affects cattle, and the *Phocine* virus that causes seal distemper. All are members of the *Paramyxoviridae* family. Young, unvaccinated puppies and non-immunized older dogs tend to be more susceptible to the disease.

Symptoms and Types

The virus, which is spread through the air and by direct or indirect (i.e. utensils, bedding) contact with an infected animal, initially attacks a dog's tonsils and *lymph nodes* and replicates itself there for about one week. It then attacks the respiratory, urogenital, *gastrointestinal*, and nervous systems.

In the initial stages of Canine Distemper, the major symptoms include high fever (≥ 103.5 ° F, or 39.7° C), reddened eyes, and a watery discharge from the nose and eyes. An infected dog will become lethargic and tired, and will usually become anorexic. Persistent coughing, vomiting, and diarrhea may also occur. In the later stages of the disease, the virus starts attacking the other systems of the dog's body, particularly the nervous system. The brain and spinal cord are affected and the dog may start having fits, seizures, paralysis, and attacks of hysteria.

Canine distemper is sometimes also called "hard pad disease" because certain strains of the virus can cause an abnormal enlargement of the animal's feet. In dogs or animals with weak immune systems, this occurs rather rarely. Bacterial infections of the respiratory system may also increase an animal's vulnerability to the disease. Non-infected animals with an infected animal carry a particular risk.

Causes

The disease can be acquired from infected animals, but this occurs rather rarely. Bacterial infections of the respiratory system may also increase an animal's vulnerability to the disease. Non-infected animals with an infected animal carry a particular risk.



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Diagnosis

Canine distemper is diagnosed with biochemical tests and urine analysis, which may also reveal a reduced number of lymphocytes, the white blood cells that function in the immune system in the initial stages of the disease (*lymphopenia*). A *serology* test may identify positive antibodies, but this test cannot distinguish between vaccination antibodies and an exposure to a *virulent* virus. Viral antigens may be detected in urine sediment or vaginal imprints. Haired skin, nasal mucous, and the footpad *epithelium* may be tested for antibodies as well. Radiographs can only be used to determine whether an infected animal has contracted pneumonia. Computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans can be used to examine the brain for any lesions that may have developed.

Treatment

Unfortunately, there is no cure for canine distemper. Treatment for the disease, therefore, is heavily focused on alleviating the symptoms. If the animal has become anorexic or has diarrhea, intravenous supportive fluids may be given. Discharge from the eyes and nose must be cleaned away regularly. Antibiotics may be prescribed to control the symptoms caused by a secondary bacterial infection, and phenobarbitals and potassium bromide may be needed to control convulsions and seizures. There are no antiviral drugs that are effective in treating the disease.

Living and Management

In the more *acute* stages of canine distemper, it is necessary to monitor for development of pneumonia or *dehydration* from diarrhea. The central nervous system (CNS) must also be monitored because seizures and other neural disturbances may occur. A dog's chances for surviving canine distemper will depend on the strain of the virus and the strength of the dog's immune system. Recovery is entirely possible, although seizures and other fatal disturbances to the CNS may occur two to three months after recovery. Fully recovered dogs do not spread or carry the virus.

Prevention

The best prevention for canine distemper is routine vaccinations and immediate isolation of infected animals. Special care must be taken to protect new-born pups from exposure, since they are especially susceptible to the disease.

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