

What Is Parvovirus?

from <http://www.aspca.org/pet-care/dog-care/parvovirus>

Canine parvovirus is a highly contagious viral disease that can produce a life-threatening illness. The virus attacks rapidly dividing cells in a dog's body, most severely affecting the intestinal tract. Parvovirus also attacks the white blood cells, and when young animals are infected, the virus can damage the heart muscle and cause lifelong cardiac problems.

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.

How Is Parvovirus Diagnosed?

Veterinarians diagnose parvovirus on the basis of clinical signs and laboratory testing. The Enzyme Linked ImmunoSorbant 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 blood work.

Which Dogs Are Prone to Parvovirus?

Puppies, adolescent dogs and canines that are not current on their vaccinations are most susceptible to the virus as well as puppies that have not completed their complete series of vaccinations. The canine parvovirus affects most members of the dog family (wolves, coyotes, foxes, etc.). Breeds at a higher risk are Rottweiler, 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.

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.

What Are Some Other Health Issues with These Same Symptoms?

A puppy with a bloody diarrhea could have a parasite problem, a virus other than parvovirus, a stress colitis, or may have eaten something that disagreed with him or injured and blocked his digestive tract. It's crucial that you see your vet for an accurate diagnosis.