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Commonly Asked Questions About Parvovirus Infection In Dogs

Parvovirus infection in dogs is a serious and often life threatening infection of dogs. Parvovirus has been recognized as a cause of viral diarrhea for thirty years. The virus has undergone changes over the years, with new strains arising that are more virulent than the parent strain. Although vaccination is effective in preventing infection in many dogs, parvovirus remains a common cause of illness in pet dogs.

How did my dog get parvovirus?

Dogs acquire the infection by one of two ways. The most common is exposure to the virus in the feces of infected dogs. Some puppies can acquire the virus in utero or shortly after birth. Parvovirus is shed in the feces of infected dogs 3-4 days after exposure, and is shed for a total of 7-10 days. Shedding of the virus in stool often occurs before the onset of clinical signs. Parvovirus can infect dogs of any age or breed, but young dogs between 6 weeks and 6 months of age are at highest risk. Certain breeds of dogs may be more susceptible to infection. These include Rottweilers, Doberman pinschers, Labrador retrievers

What is parvovirus?

Canine parvovirus is a member of the parvovirus family. Many different types of species-specific parvoviruses exist. They are very small and hardy viruses; they can live in the environment for prolonged periods of time and remain infectious. The parvovirus of one animal species does not infect another species. Another example of a parvovirus is feline panleukopenia (“feline distemper”) virus.

What are the signs of parvovirus infection?

The classic sign of parvovirus infection is bloody diarrhea. Vomiting, anorexia, lethargy and depression are also common signs. Many times dogs will exhibit one of these other signs before developing diarrhea. This can provide a challenge to diagnosing dogs with parvovirus, since many other diseases cause these same non-specific signs.

My dog was vaccinated for parvovirus. Why did they get the disease?

Although the current available parvovirus vaccines are very effective, they are not perfect. Puppies receive some antibodies against parvovirus from their mother. These antibodies can block a pup's own antibodies, and can inhibit a strong response to vaccination. Maternal antibodies can last as long as 18 weeks, sometimes even longer. If a puppy has not yet fully responded to vaccination by producing its own antibodies, it is susceptible to infection. This can occur even if the owner has been diligent in vaccinating their puppy on schedule. Occasionally, a mature dog's immune system does not respond well to the vaccine. Rarely, this dog can develop clinical infection.

How can I prevent the disease?

Adherence to puppy vaccination protocols is essential in providing protection against infection. Keeping young dogs away from dogs with unknown vaccination histories may also help. Many owners avoid taking their puppies to public places until they have received their entire series of vaccinations. Dogs which are infected with parvovirus and develop clinical signs are often immune for life once they recover from the infection.

I have other dogs in my home. Are they at risk of infection?

Once parvovirus infection has been diagnosed, all other dogs the patient has contacted have been exposed to the virus. Well vaccinated, healthy older dogs usually have enough antibody protection to be immune from disease. Young dogs, particularly other puppies, are at risk. Since parvovirus is very stable in the environment, owners can carry the virus on clothes, shoes and other inanimate objects. For this reason, we limit visitation of our parvovirus patients, and keep them isolated from other hospitalized pets. It is important that the environment be disinfected. A 1:30 dilution of chlorine bleach will kill the virus in a few minutes. Promptly cleaning up fecal material decreases potential pathogen contact.