

Canine Distemper

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One of the most important vaccinations to give to your dog is the distemper vaccination. Due to its name, people quite often believe that somehow this vaccination relates to the dog's temperament and is a means to keep it from becoming aggressive. It has no association with controlling the demeanor of the dog, but rather protects it against a very serious and deadly disease.

Distemper is caused by a virus which affects the respiratory, gastrointestinal and central nervous systems. It is very contagious, incurable and often fatal. It has a worldwide distribution and was a leading cause of death in unvaccinated puppies, which are most susceptible to the infection. In the 1960s a vaccination preventing distemper was introduced which caused a dramatic reduction in cases in pet dogs. Due to widespread vaccination programs utilized currently the incidence of distemper has been greatly reduced.

Distemper still is a serious risk to all unvaccinated dogs. Young puppies between 3 and 6 months of age are the most susceptible to infection and are more likely to die than infected adults. Non-vaccinated older dogs are also highly susceptible to infection.

The virus exists in the environment, especially in unvaccinated dogs and wild animals such as raccoons, skunks and foxes. The infection is spread by airborne viral particles passed in bodily secretions, especially those from the respiratory tract.

Symptoms of the disease usually begin as a fever and eventually develop into gastrointestinal and respiratory signs, such as runny nose, conjunctivitis, diarrhea, vomiting and pneumonia. As the disease progresses neurological signs develop including seizures, incoordination, staggering, twitching, spasms and paralysis.

There is no specific treatment for the viral infection, just supportive care. Most dogs die from the disease and those that survive may have permanent central nervous system damage.

The best way to avoid this deadly disease is through vaccination. Puppies should be put on a vaccination schedule outlined by your veterinarian. You should keep to this schedule as puppies are at the greatest risk to develop the disease. The protection provided by the vaccinations begins to wane over time so booster vaccinations are essential to maintain immunity to distemper at effective levels. Depending upon the vaccinations used by your veterinarian boosters are given yearly or every three years.

Do not take any chances with this disease. Distemper is a real threat that exists for your pets. It is easily prevented by properly vaccinating your dogs and maintaining their booster vaccinations. The distemper virus vaccination is usually combined with other viruses, including parvovirus and adenovirus (we will discuss these in separate articles) so protection against multiple diseases is provided.

There have been improvements in vaccinations over the years so now some provide three years of protection and are labeled accordingly. Because of concerns with possible complications due to vaccinations there have been recommendations that in order to reduce this risk that “three year” vaccinations should be used and a three year protocol followed. This was a recommendation by AAHA and as we are an AAHA-accredited hospital we follow their protocol so we can provide effective and safe protection for your pets. Three year vaccinations are available for distemper/parvovirus combinations and rabies, however, for some other diseases three year vaccinations are not yet available. We recommend the three year vaccinations for the distemper/parvovirus combination and rabies, with annual vaccinations for Leptospira, Lyme disease and Bordetella, depending upon your pet’s risk of exposure to these diseases.

A vaccination protocol will be tailored for your pet’s needs and risk factors. In some cases, clients prefer using annual vaccinations and not using three year vaccinations, which we do accommodate. We can discuss the vaccinations at the time of your pet’s examination or contact the hospital if you have any questions.