

Distemper and Parvo

By Diane Jarvis

Many veterinarians have experienced this sad scenario – someone brings in a new puppy for vaccinations when the puppy is already sick in the hope the vaccine will “cure” it. Sadly, two of the most prevalent diseases are also the most deadly – canine distemper and canine parvovirus infection (parvo).

Sick animals cannot be vaccinated. They must undergo intensive and often costly treatment. Survival rates are low, and those who recover may have other problems.

The distemper virus is transmitted from dog to dog via urine, blood or saliva. The most common transmission is through sneezing, coughing or sharing food and water bowls. It may take anywhere from 3 days to 2 weeks for your dog to show the symptoms, and the first signs may resemble a bad cold; thick mucous discharge from the nose or eyes, coughing and sneezing. The dog may also suffer from fever, lethargy, vomiting and diarrhea.

Distemper causes a puppy to be very weak and barely able to stand. The virus can travel to the dog’s brain, causing seizures or disorders of the nervous system such as shaking and trembling. There may even be some paralysis. Distemper weakens the immune system and the dog cannot fight off secondary infections like pneumonia or bronchitis.

Distemper is a horrific, debilitating disease with a survival rate of approximately 20 percent. Since distemper may start with such mild symptoms it may not be recognized or diagnosed immediately, allowing it to progress. Once diagnosed, treatment is mostly supportive care such as intravenous fluids and antibiotics to prevent secondary infections. Dogs that recover may suffer permanent brain, nerve or retinal damage, or hardening of the skin of the nose or foot pads. Once a dog has had distemper, he cannot ever receive the distemper vaccine.

Parvo is a highly contagious viral disease that attacks the intestinal track, white blood cells, and occasionally the heart muscle. It is also spread by dog-to-dog contact via fecal waste from infected dogs. Parvo is found wherever dogs congregate including parks, shelters, boarding kennels, and dog shows. The virus can be carried on the hair of feet of infected dogs, or on contaminated cages, shoes, or other objects.

The symptoms of parvo include depression, loss of appetite, vomiting and severe diarrhea. There may be an elevated rectal temperature. Incubation periods can be from 5 to 7 days after exposure, and an infected dog may dehydrate rapidly due to loss of body fluids. Many die within 48 to 72 hours after symptoms first start.

This is also a serious disease with a survival rate of about 65 percent. Parvo causes repeated vomiting, projectile and bloody diarrhea. Puppies are the most susceptible, and suffer with shock-like deaths in as little as 48 hours after onset. Some breeds, such as Rottweilers, Dobermans, German Shepherds and American Pit Bull Terriers seem to be

more vulnerable to parvo. Older dogs have a better survival rate, but can still be miserably ill.

The virus is very hearty and can exist in the environment for many months unless the area is thoroughly cleaned. A solution of one-fourth cup bleach in a gallon of water will kill the virus but it is often hard to disinfect an entire house and yard adequately.

Seeing puppies and dogs die of these diseases is particularly frustrating since they are both preventable through vaccinations. A puppy can receive its first vaccination (which includes protection against both distemper and parvo) at six weeks of age, with boosters at three to four week intervals until it is 12-16 weeks old. After that he will need annual boosters to stay healthy. A dog that has recovered from parvo may receive the parvo vaccine.

Regardless of your puppy's age at adoption, the first visit should always be to the vet for a check up and shots. Don't take your new dog to the park to show him off or let him walk on surfaces where other dogs have access. Keep him away from any fecal waste on lawns, sidewalks or gravel to protect him from disease and parasites. Minimize his exposure to potential dangers until he has finished the series of vaccines.

If you have a new puppy or dog that hasn't yet seen a vet and they show any signs of illness, get them to a doctor immediately. Time is of the essence in treating either distemper or parvo and can truly be a matter of life or death.