

Canine Distemper in Dogs

Canine Distemper: What You Need to Know

Canine distemper is a serious and potentially fatal virus that primarily affects dogs, though it's related to the human measles virus. Thanks to vaccinations, it's rare today, but for unvaccinated dogs, particularly puppies, distemper is still a dangerous risk.



What Is Canine Distemper?

Canine distemper used to be a devastating disease that could wipe out entire towns of dogs. The virus attacks multiple systems in the body, including the nervous system, and can be deadly if left untreated. Thankfully, since the 1950s, vaccinations have dramatically reduced its occurrence. However, dogs without up-to-date vaccinations—especially puppies raised in poor environments—are still vulnerable.

What Are the Symptoms of Canine Distemper?

The tricky thing about distemper is that the early symptoms can be subtle, making it hard to catch right away. Initially, your dog might show signs like:

- **Discharge from the eyes and nose** (mucousy or watery)
- **Loss of appetite**
- **Coughing**
- **Pneumonia**
- **Fever** (which can be hard to detect as it may come and go)

Since these early symptoms are often mild, they might go unnoticed—especially in dogs with partial immunity due to incomplete or outdated vaccinations.

As the virus spreads through the body, more severe symptoms can appear, including:

- **Vomiting**
- **Diarrhoea**
- **Thickened paw pads** (hence its old nickname, “hard pad disease”)

At this point, a healthy dog’s immune system may be able to fight off the virus. But if it progresses further, the virus can reach the **nervous system**, leading to much more



serious symptoms:

- **Seizures** (ranging from jaw tremors to full-body convulsions)
- **Twitching**
- **Muscle stiffness**
- **Weakness in the limbs**
- **Loss of balance**

How Do Dogs Get Canine Distemper?

Distemper spreads easily, primarily through direct contact with an infected dog’s saliva—like from a sneeze or cough—or even through their urine. Any dog that hasn’t had its core vaccinations is at risk.

Diagnosing Canine Distemper

Diagnosing canine distemper can be difficult. Your vet might perform a **PCR blood test** or check your dog's antibody levels. However, tests can sometimes give **false negatives**, making it hard to confirm a diagnosis.

How Is Canine Distemper Treated?

Unfortunately, there's no cure for distemper. Treatment focuses on **supportive care**, such as:

- **Fluids** to prevent dehydration
- Medications to control symptoms like **seizures**



The key to survival is catching it early. If treatment begins before the virus attacks the nervous system, many dogs can recover fully. However, once the nervous system is involved, recovery becomes less likely, and long-term health issues—or death—are more common. Still, some dogs with strong immune systems do manage to recover, even at this late stage.

Can Humans Catch Canine Distemper?

No, you don't have to worry about contracting distemper from your dog. While the virus is related to measles, it does not spread to humans. Similarly, humans can't pass measles to dogs.

How to Prevent Canine Distemper

The best way to protect your dog is through **regular vaccinations** from puppyhood onward. Keeping vaccinations up to date is crucial, as this is the only reliable form of protection. Additionally, cleaning surfaces with disinfectants—especially in areas where dogs gather—can help eliminate the virus in environments.

In short, while distemper can be devastating, it's largely preventable. Regular vaccinations give your dog the best shot at staying safe from this potentially deadly virus.