



Canine Distemper: A Serious Threat to Dogs

Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) is a highly contagious, serious, and often fatal disease that affects the **respiratory, gastrointestinal (GI), and nervous systems** of dogs. It is related to the measles virus in humans. Unvaccinated puppies and dogs are at the highest risk.



What is Distemper and How is it Spread?

Canine Distemper is caused by the Canine Distemper Virus (CDV).

- **Transmission:** The virus spreads rapidly, primarily through **airborne exposure** (e.g., coughing, sneezing, or barking) from an infected animal. It can also be transmitted through:
 - Direct contact with bodily fluids (saliva, urine, feces).
 - Shared food and water bowls, bedding, or toys.
- **Contagiousness:** Infected dogs can shed the virus for several months and may be contagious even before showing symptoms.
- **Affected Animals:** While domestic dogs are the main concern, the virus can also infect certain wildlife, such as raccoons, foxes, and skunks.
- **Risk Factors:** The most vulnerable are **unvaccinated puppies (under four months)** and unvaccinated adult dogs.



Symptoms: What to Watch For

Signs of distemper vary widely and often progress in stages. Initially, symptoms may resemble a common cold.

Early Stage (Respiratory and GI System)

- **Eye and Nose Discharge:** Watery, or thick, yellow-to-green pus-like discharge from the eyes (often called **ocular discharge**) and nose (nasal discharge).
- **Fever:** High fever (though it can be intermittent and hard to detect).
- **Respiratory Issues:** Coughing, sneezing, and difficulty breathing, which can progress to **pneumonia**.
- **Gastrointestinal Issues:** Vomiting, diarrhea, and reduced appetite (anorexia).
- **General Signs:** Lethargy (extreme tiredness) and depression.

Later Stage (Nervous System and Other)

As the virus attacks the central nervous system (CNS), more severe and often permanent signs develop. This can happen weeks or months after the initial symptoms:

- **Neurological Signs:**
 - **Muscle Twitching** (Myoclonus), especially in the face or limbs.
 - Seizures, which can include jaw-chewing movements ("chewing gum fits") and drooling.

- Lack of coordination, stumbling, or circling.
- Head tilt.
- Partial or complete paralysis.
- **Skin/Dental Signs (Less Common):**
 - Thickening and hardening of the footpads and nose ("Hard Pad Disease").
 - Permanent tooth damage (enamel hypoplasia) if infected as a puppy before permanent teeth erupt.

Treatment and Prognosis

There is no specific cure for Canine Distemper.

- **Supportive Care:** Treatment focuses on providing intensive nursing care to manage symptoms and help the dog's immune system fight the virus. This includes:
 - **IV Fluid Therapy** to prevent dehydration from vomiting and diarrhea.
 - **Antibiotics** to treat secondary bacterial infections (like pneumonia) that occur because the virus weakens the immune system.
 - **Medication** to control vomiting, diarrhea, and seizures.
- **Hospitalization:** Infected dogs often require long-term hospitalization and isolation to prevent spread.
- **Prognosis:** The outcome depends heavily on the dog's immune response and the severity of the neurological symptoms.
 - Dogs with strong immune systems may recover, but those with severe neurological involvement have a poorer prognosis and are at high risk of death.
 - **Survivors often have permanent, irreparable nervous system damage** and may suffer from lifelong muscle twitching (myoclonus) or chronic seizures.

Prevention: Vaccination is Key

Vaccination is the single most effective way to protect your dog from Canine Distemper.

1. **Core Vaccine:** The distemper vaccine (often combined with Parvovirus, Adenovirus, and Parainfluenza in the DHPP/DAPP shot) is considered a **core vaccine** for all dogs.
2. **Puppy Series:** Puppies require a series of vaccinations, usually starting around **6-8 weeks of age** and repeated every 3-4 weeks until they are **16-20 weeks old**. This is crucial because a puppy's initial protection (maternal antibodies) can interfere with the vaccine.
3. **Adult Boosters:** Following the initial series, dogs receive a booster one year later, and then typically every three years thereafter (as recommended by your veterinarian).
4. **Isolation:** Keep puppies and unvaccinated dogs away from dog parks, group settings, and areas where infected animals may have been, until they have completed their full vaccine series.

If you suspect your dog has been exposed to or is showing signs of distemper, contact your veterinarian immediately.