

Canine Influenza (H3N8)

In January 2004, there was a sudden outbreak of respiratory disease among 22 racing greyhounds at a Florida racetrack. Most of the dogs developed a mild fever followed by a cough that lasted about 14 days, and then recovered. But slightly more than one third of the dogs died after developing hemorrhaging in the lungs. Within six months, the virus turned up in other racing greyhounds at tracks in six other states- then at 20 tracks in 11 states, and now the virus has affected pet dogs in over 30 states. However, it is most prevalent in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Colorado.

The canine flu virus actually mutated from a virus that has affected horses for over forty years. And since there has never been a case of the equine virus affecting humans, experts are fairly certain that the canine influenza virus will not infect humans either. But with the recent news and hype about the human swine flu, the canine influenza virus will continue to be monitored closely.

Canine influenza should be considered in dogs presenting with a cough and a recent history of exposure to other dogs. The biggest predisposing factor would be the pet's lifestyle. If within the last 10 to 14 days, the dog was at a shelter, rescue facility, pet store, boarding facility, groomer, or doggie day care, canine influenza is a possible diagnosis. This new virus is easily transmitted between dogs in much the same way that flu spreads among humans, but not all dogs get sick and not all dogs who get sick will die. However, because this is still considered a new virus, all dogs are considered susceptible to infection because they have no naturally acquired or vaccine induced immunity. Another problem is that the canine flu virus may initially be misdiagnosed as another respiratory disease in dogs known as "kennel cough" which could further cause the rapid spread of the disease.

Dr. Cynda Crawford, University of Florida Veterinary School veterinarian and researcher, in a scientific paper when the virus was first identified said, "Canine influenza is really the new kid on the block for vets to consider in the differential diagnosis for kennel cough." She further cautions veterinarians that while 80 percent of flu-stricken dogs will have a mild form of the disease, even dogs who are not overtly sick could be contagious. When asked why we haven't heard much about this disease in recent years, she states, "I think when it was first reported in 2004 it was a very newsworthy item. I think the virus has now become commonplace in many communities throughout the United States and so it has lost its newsworthy glamour." This may change with the release of the new vaccination and the hype of the Swine flu vaccine about to be released.

Dog owners should take heed that if their dogs are coughing, sneezing, or have runny nose, they should not "shrug it off" as just kennel cough, "a little cold" or even allergies. Canine influenza usually starts out with coughing or gagging that may last as long as three weeks. Symptoms typically appear within 7 to 10 days post exposure. Clinical signs in dogs include coughing, runny nose, lethargy, depression, and a fever as high as 103-107 degrees. In the acute and severe form, a viral pneumonia can develop.

While highly contagious, some good news is that the virus is easily killed by soap and water, disinfectants and 10 percent bleach solutions. Transmission can be prevented by isolating all suspected dogs, thorough cleaning of all cages and exposed surfaces such as floors, kennels food dishes and bedding. Animal caretakers should be diligent about wearing disposable gloves or washing hands in between handling dogs and any urine, stool, or saliva, and before entering or leaving any facility that houses dogs.

In September 2008, the AVMA News Update stated, “The AVMA believes there is an urgent need for an effective canine influenza virus vaccine to improve the health and welfare of animals and reduce the financial impacts of the canine influenza.” Intervet Schering-Plough Animal Health has developed a vaccine for the Canine Influenza Vaccine (H3N8).

Intervet Schering-Plough Animal Health developed “this new vaccination (to) aid in the control of the disease associated with canine influenza virus infection. It has been demonstrated to reduce the incidence and severity of lung lesions as well as duration of coughing and viral shedding.” Pet owners will want to discuss the new vaccination with their veterinarian and decide if it is right for their pet. The initial series is two vaccinations given two (2) to four (4) weeks apart. It can be administered to pet’s six (6) weeks or older. Annual vaccination is recommended.

While veterinarians do want dog owners to be aware and cautious of the canine influenza flu, they do not want people to panic. They warn owners to take their dog to their veterinarian at the first sign of any respiratory illness or problem. The virus has been identified in dogs of all ages. Dogs may be at higher risk if they are young, old, have an immune problem, or are undergoing chemotherapy. Diagnosing the Canine influenza virus is difficult based on the shedding periods and the onset of clinical symptoms. Depending on the stage of presentation to the veterinarian, there are multiple tests that can be performed. Blood testing during several phases of the illness may be the most common recommended by your veterinarian.

Dog owners should contact their veterinarians for more information and to stay current on news about this disease

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