



Dr. Laura Weis

practices veterinary medicine in Bucks County, PA, where she and her husband, Dr. Ransome Weis, own Doylestown Veterinary Hospital and Holiday House Pet Resort. She writes and blogs about small animal medicine with a focus on client education. Dr. Weis has a special interest in pet nutrition and geriatric medicine. Outside of work Dr. Weis spends most of her time with her two-and four-legged family members and enjoys her bees, goats, and chickens.

Canine Influenza: The Dog Flu

We're all familiar with the human influenza virus that makes the rounds every winter. We sneeze, cough, have a runny nose and suffer from chills and fever. Your dog can catch the flu as well, and although the symptoms are similar to human flu, the virus is not the same one that infects people. In 2004 the horse influenza virus mutated to a form known as H3N8, and began to infect dogs for the first time. The virus quickly spread from its original location in Florida and has now been verified in most of the United States. In 2015 a new strain of canine influenza, H3N2, was identified in Chicago. H3N2 had been found previously only in regions of Asia and is thought to have originated from an avian flu strain. This new virus has spread to thousands of dogs in many parts of the United States.

The Signs

The signs of Canine Influenza Virus (CIV) are virtually identical to those caused by many other viruses and bacteria that cause Canine Cough or the Canine Infectious Respiratory Disease (CIRD) complex. A dog will develop a low grade fever, a soft moist cough and possibly nasal discharge. Although most dogs will recover without complications, a small percent may develop life-threatening pneumonia. Young puppies, old dogs, and dogs with pre-existing heart or respiratory conditions are at higher risk. Because the clinical signs of CIV closely resemble those of other canine respiratory diseases, any dog showing symptoms should be seen by a veterinarian.

CIV spreads quickly among dogs for a few reasons

First, most dogs are naive to the virus. In other words, their immune systems have never "seen" CIV and thus almost 100% of exposed dogs will become infected. In addition, the 2 to 4 day incubation period from exposure to the development of clinical signs is when dogs are at their most contagious. Peak viral shedding takes place when a dog is either showing no signs of disease or, at most, a slight runny nose. Finally, diagnosis of CIV is tricky. The most reliable time to test for canine flu is during the period before clinical signs are apparent. Testing outside of this window is complicated and false negative test results are common.

Vaccines

The good news is that there are safe and effective vaccines for both strains of CIV. While the vaccines do not completely prevent infection, they reduce symptoms to a mild form and greatly decrease viral shedding. Currently there are two separate vaccines, one for each strain of the flu. Each vaccine is administered as a series of 2 injections, two to four weeks apart. This is strongly recommended for any dog that has a social life. Respiratory viruses can be encountered at dog parks, grooming salons, pet care facilities, veterinary clinics, on your pet sitter's clothing or on walks around your neighborhood. Most quality pet care facilities will require these vaccine in order to protect the dogs in their care.

Treatment

If your dog develops signs of respiratory disease, schedule an appointment with your veterinarian. Treatment for most cases of CIV consists of keeping your dog in a warm and dry environment, feeding high quality food, and offering plenty of fluids. If your veterinarian is concerned about secondary bacterial infections, an antibiotic may be prescribed. Your dog should be kept at home for two weeks in order to avoid exposing other dogs. Since the virus is not contagious to people, you can safely provide the love and care that will help your dog return to full health.