

Parvovirus in Dogs

Canine parvovirus (also called parvo) is a very contagious and potentially fatal viral disease seen in dogs. Most commonly, parvovirus causes gastroenteritis, or inflammation of the stomach and intestines.

Parvo is contagious and can survive for several months (some experts say as long as 2 years) in the environment, and is also resistant to many disinfectants. Infection can occur directly through contact with infected dogs, but also through indirect contact with contaminated surfaces and objects. Dogs of any age can get parvo, depending on their vaccination history, but some dogs are more susceptible than others. Puppies 6-20 weeks old are most susceptible (it takes some time for the vaccination series to become fully protective) but even unvaccinated adult dogs can become infected.

It is estimated that parvovirus is fatal in 16-48% of cases. Consult your vet as soon as possible if your dog shows signs of parvovirus.

Signs and Symptoms of Parvovirus

- Vomiting
- Diarrhea (may be bloody)
- Lethargy
- Loss of appetite
- Fever

Diagnosis of Parvovirus

A tentative diagnosis of parvovirus can be made based on the age, vaccination history, symptoms and physical exam. Confirmation of the diagnosis is through detection of the virus in a fecal sample via a quick test kit. If a dog has recently been vaccinated for the parvo virus the test may show up positive and other diagnostics may be required to determine if parvo is the cause for symptoms seen.

Treatment of Parvovirus

Treatment depends on the severity of disease and is aimed at managing symptoms until the virus runs its course. Fluid therapy to combat dehydration is extremely important. Medications are sometimes used to reduce vomiting. Antibiotics may be used to fight secondary bacterial infections, and in very severe cases blood or plasma transfusions may be given. Hospitalization is almost always required and highly recommended.

Preventing Parvovirus

Vaccination is the best defense against parvovirus. In puppies the first vaccine is typically given at about 6-8 weeks of age, and repeated every 3-4 weeks until 22 weeks of age, with yearly vaccines thereafter.

Until puppies have had their last vaccination, it is prudent to be careful about their exposure to other dogs and places where dogs frequently defecate (e.g., dog parks) to avoid exposure as much as possible.

Because the virus survives for so long, if you have had a dog with parvovirus in your home, you should be careful about introducing a new puppy or unvaccinated dog for at least 6 months (possibly longer).

Home Care and Disinfection

A dog with parvovirus should be isolated from other dogs, especially puppies. An infected dog can shed the virus for 3 weeks or more after being ill (keep your dog at home during this time to avoid spreading the virus to other dogs).

Parvovirus is resistant to many disinfectants. A solution of one part bleach to 30 parts water is effective, but can only be used on bleach-safe items. Other disinfectants such as ParvoFoam that are labeled as effective against parvovirus can also be used and are available in our office. However, because the virus is difficult to completely eliminate (especially in the yard), it is important to follow your vet's advice about bringing a new dog into the home even after careful disinfection.