

Canine Cough

One of the public relations problems for pet care facilities continues to be a much misunderstood disease in dogs called “canine cough,” tracheobronchitis, or often improperly referred to as “kennel cough.” As a dog owner you should be aware of some of the facts about this disease.

What is “Canine Cough?”

Infectious tracheobronchitis is a highly contagious, upper-respiratory disease that is spread by any one of three infectious agents (parainfluenza, adenovirus, or Bordetella) or any combination thereof—most often passed on through the air, it can also be transmitted on hands or clothing. The incubation period of the disease is roughly three to ten days and an infected pet may be contagious for three weeks after showing the first signs of illness. The main symptom is a hacking cough, sometimes accompanied by sneezing and nasal discharge, which can last from a few days to several weeks. Although this coughing is very annoying, it does not usually develop into anything more serious; however, just as with a common cold, it can lower the dog’s resistance to other diseases making it susceptible to secondary infections, and so the dog must be observed closely to avoid complications. Canine cough can be an especially serious problem for puppies and geriatric dogs whose immune systems may be weaker.

How is it cured?

Just as in the case of the common cold, tracheobronchitis is not “cured” but must run its course; however, any animal displaying signs of the illness should be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible. Many times antibiotics will be prescribed to prevent secondary infection, and sometimes cough suppressants will be prescribed to reduce excessive coughing, but these medications do not attack the disease itself. Home remedy treatments for canine cough without the consultation of a veterinarian are not recommended.

Does tracheobronchitis occur only in pet care facilities?

No. Since these viruses can be present anywhere, and can travel for considerable distances through the air, they can affect any dog, even one that never leaves its own back yard. But tracheobronchitis is more likely to occur when the concentration of dogs is greater such as at dog shows, kennels, dog daycares, veterinarian offices and hospitals as well as pet shops. Dogs can also be exposed while running loose or while being walked near other dogs, or playing in the park.

But aren’t the chances of catching it greater when a dog is in a boarding kennel or daycare?

Yes. Because, in any pet care facility, a dog encounters two conditions that do not usually exist at home; proximity to a number of potentially contagious dogs, and the stress and excitement of a less familiar environment, which can result in lower resistance to disease (these same factors explain why children are more likely to catch the flu at school, rather than at home). But the more frequently a dog visits a pet care facility, the greater are the chances that it will acquire immunity to the disease. Even during a widespread breakout, only a fairly small percentage of exposed dogs are affected.

Are these viruses a constant problem?

No. Tracheobronchitis, like the flu, is often seasonal – mainly due to the fact that the busiest seasons for pet care facilities tend to be summertime or over holiday periods. It also tends to be epidemic. When veterinarians begin to see cases, they normally come from every pet care facility in town, as well as from individual dog owners whose dogs did not visit a facility at all. When the outbreak is over, they might not see another case for months.

Can my dog be vaccinated to protect him from tracheobronchitis?

Yes! Vaccines against parainfluenza and adenovirus type 2 (in combination with other vaccines) are routinely used as part of an adult dog's yearly checkup. Puppies are usually vaccinated for these in combination with distemper, hepatitis, and parvovirus in a series of immunizations. Specific, non-routine vaccines are also available for *Bordetella bronchiseptica* (another cause of canine cough). Although some veterinary practices do not use this vaccination routinely, it should be considered for pets that board, visit a daycare frequently, or for those whose veterinarian recommends it. It is important to note that the vaccines that are used to prevent this viral disease are made from only one of the over 100 different strains of the virus and therefore are not as effective against some strains as others. Some strains are not included in any vaccine; therefore, there is no prevention against them. Your veterinarian is in the best position to recommend a program of preventative health care management depending on your pet's needs. In most cases, veterinarians recommend that you obtain vaccinations for canine cough five to seven days before taking your dog to a pet care facility.

Can't the boarding kennel or daycare prevent my dog from catching tracheobronchitis?

While the spread of canine cough can be minimized by proper cleaning, isolating obviously sick animals, and properly ventilating the facility, remember that no amount of supervision, sanitation, or personalized care is guaranteed to be 100% effective against the illness. All that a good pet care facility can do is recommend immunization against tracheobronchitis, refuse to admit an obviously sick dog, follow responsible cleaning and sanitation practices, listen and watch for any signs of sickness, and make sure that any dog requiring veterinary attention receives it as quickly as possible. (Strangely, the dog with parainfluenza alone may not appear ill, yet is contagious) You have a right to expect a pet care facility to provide the best possible care just as that facility has a right to expect you to accept financial responsibility for such care.