

PARVOVIRUS

Canine parvovirus (“parvo”) infection is a relatively new disease that first emerged in 1978, causing widespread severe disease and deaths in canine patients. The rapid development of an efficacious vaccine quickly controlled the virus, however even today we do see low levels of parvo in the canine community.

Parvo is caused by a virus (Parvovirus). It is spread by the faecal-oral route, meaning that dogs come into contact with the virus via oral contact with faeces of affected dogs. It typically takes 7-14 days following exposure for clinical symptoms to develop. Affected dogs will shed the virus in their faeces just prior to development of clinical symptoms, and then for up to 10 days following this. The virus is very stable and persistent in the environment, and can survive for periods of up to 2 years, being resistant to heat and many detergents. The virus can be killed using strong bleach solutions.

Parvo causes many clinical symptoms, the most notable being severe vomiting and diarrhoea, often containing blood. Other symptoms include inappetance, lethargy, depression, fever, dehydration and abdominal pain.

Parvo is most often seen in young pups between 6 weeks and 6 months of age, although I have seen it in unvaccinated dogs older than 10 years of age. Larger breed dogs are generally considered to be slightly more susceptible to contracting parvo, although I have seen it in tiny puppies weighing less than 1kg. Rottweilers and Dobermans (“black and tan puppies”) certainly seem to be at increased risk, other breeds that may have a slight breed predilection include pit bulls, Labrador retrievers, German Shepherds and English springer spaniels.

Parvo can be easily diagnosed by your veterinarian using a simple testing kit. Affected animals can also be successfully treated, although treatment generally has to be very aggressive, involving hospitalisation, intravenous fluids, antibiotics and other supportive drugs. Usually successful treatment will require a prolonged hospital stay (5 days or longer), and treatment is generally also very costly.

Parvo can be very easily prevented by an appropriate vaccination protocol. Vaccination is highly protective against this disease. The incidence of parvo in the canine community has been reduced to a very low level due to the fact that a high percentage of dogs are vaccinated, however if this percentage was to dwindle, the incidence of parvo would likely increase again. Animal shelters and welfare organisations tend to see a constant low level of parvo. Otherwise, most cases are seen in young puppies in pet shops, due to inadequate cleaning of cages. Unfortunately we do see occasional outbreaks in the general community, these outbreaks are often more common in warmer months (although are possible at any time of the year). Canine parvovirus is not transmissible to humans or cats. If you have any questions or concerns about this disease, or your dog has not been recently vaccinated, it would be recommended that you contact your veterinarian.

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