

Canine Kennel Cough Fact Sheet

What is “Kennel Cough”?

“Kennel Cough” is the common name for a highly contagious upper respiratory disease of dogs. It is caused by canine Para influenza virus, bacteria called Bordetella bronchiseptica, or a combination of the two. Kennel cough is commonly seen in dogs that are exposed to many other dogs in places such as animal shelters or boarding kennels. Kennel cough is “species specific,” meaning it infects only dogs and puppies, not cats or humans.

How is it transmitted?

Kennel cough is transferred between dogs by fluid discharge from the mouth or nose of an infected dog, similar to that of the common cold in humans. Dogs can shed the virus through the air by sneezing, coughing, or breathing; or by direct physical contact with cages, toys, food bowls, even the hands and clothes of people handling them. Some dogs may be “silent carriers” carrying and spreading the virus without showing symptoms of the disease themselves.

What are the signs?

The most common symptom of kennel cough is a dry cough sometimes described as “honking” and in some cases a gagging cough. The cough is often brought on by excitement, exercise or pressure on the dog’s trachea, such as that produced by the leash. Some dogs will only exhibit a runny nose or green nasal discharge. Affected dogs are usually otherwise alert and active, with a healthy appetite and no fever. In some cases, kennel cough may progress to pneumonia or sinus infection. In these cases, dogs will cough up mucus, have nasal discharge, have difficulty breathing, run a fever, lose their appetite, and become depressed.

How is Kennel cough treated?

Kennel cough is a “self limiting” disease, meaning that in most dogs it will go away in 5 to 10 days without treatment. Because most shelter dogs and puppies are under stress, antibiotics are often prescribed to prevent or treat secondary bacterial infections that may accompany the infection. Occasionally a cough suppressant may be prescribed to make the dog feel better and to decrease throat irritation. In rare cases, kennel cough may progress to pneumonia, requiring more intense medical therapy and hospitalization.

How is kennel cough prevented?

Kennel cough cannot be totally prevented in the shelter environment; many dogs will enter the shelter already infected, and the stress of being sheltered will lead to full-blown disease and spread the infection to other dogs and puppies. Sanitation programs, health evaluations, isolation of sick animals, and preventive health care all play a part in the control of Kennel Cough.