

Distemper in dogs

Covid-19 update: At the moment, veterinary practices may not be able to offer routine procedures such as booster vaccinations. Read our advice on [how to keep your dog safe if they miss a vaccination during lockdown](#).

Overview

- Distemper is a nasty virus that causes a wide range of symptoms including a cough, runny eyes and nose, diarrhoea, high temperature, thickened pads, tremors and fits.
- Distemper spreads in the air, through contact with infected dogs and on items they have touched.
- Distemper is a very serious illness that is sadly, often fatal.
- Vaccination has meant we now rarely see distemper in the UK, but it does still occur, especially in areas with lots of unvaccinated dogs.
- **Vaccination is the best way to protect your dog from distemper.**

What is distemper?



Distemper virus causing weepy eyes in a dog

Distemper is a nasty virus that attacks several different organs in the body including the guts, heart, immune system, lungs, brain and

nerves. Distemper causes a variety of symptoms ranging from mild cold-like signs to seizures and death. It spreads in air, bodily fluids (such as urine and saliva), and can live in the environment where an infected dog has been. Young, unvaccinated dogs are most at risk.

Symptoms

Symptoms of distemper vary a lot, depending which organs are affected and how much resistance (immunity) a dog has. Dogs can show any combination of the following symptoms:

- High temperature (fever)
- [Runny eyes](#) and nose (first watery then pus)
- [Low energy \(lethargy\)](#)
- [Loss of appetite](#)
- [Diarrhoea](#)
- Thickened paw pads and nose (hard pad)
- [Coughing](#)
- Tremors
- Paralysis
- [Seizures](#) (fits)

Distemper often starts by causing runny eyes, a cough, and diarrhoea, then after 3-4 weeks starts to cause hard pads, a hard nose and neurological signs (fits, tremors and seizures).

When to contact your vet

Contact your vet if your dog starts showing symptoms of distemper, especially if they haven't been vaccinated.

Treatment

There is no specific medicine that we can use to treat distemper (antibiotics don't work because it's a virus not a not a bacteria) so instead, treatment involves supporting your dog's body while they try to fight the infection.

Ongoing care

Your vet will advise you how to nurse your dog back to health. Once your dog has had distemper they may suffer relapses and problems throughout life.

Outlook

It's impossible to say whether your dog will survive distemper. Some dogs die during the early stages, some become so poorly that they need to be put to sleep, some are left with permanent brain damage and some are poorly for several weeks, but eventually recover.

Vaccination



In the UK distemper is much rarer than it used to be, but unvaccinated dogs are still at risk. Fortunately, it's easy to prevent by vaccinating puppies before they are let out into public / allowed to mix with other dogs, and by giving adult dogs booster vaccinations throughout their life.

Cost

Treatment for distemper can become very expensive. Bills can mount into hundred, if not thousands of pounds if your dog requires a long stay in a veterinary hospital and ongoing care. It's very important to speak openly to your vet about your finances, the cost of treatment,

as well as what you think is right for your dog. There might be more than one treatment option, so if one doesn't work for you and your pet then the vet may be able to offer another.

Consider insuring your dog as soon as you get them, before any signs of illness start. This will ensure you have all the support you need to care for them. Remember, you can prevent illness such as distemper by keep your dog up to date with their vaccinations.

Taking an unvaccinated puppy outside

An unvaccinated puppy, or a puppy that has only had their first injection has no protection against xx distemper or the other diseases we vaccinate against. Your puppy will be safe to go out for a walk and meet other dogs one-two weeks after they complete their first vaccination course. Until then:

- **Home and garden.** Your puppy is safe to go into your garden as long as no unvaccinated dogs have visited recently.
- **Public places.** You can take your puppy out into public but make sure you carry them and don't put them down onto the ground
- **Puppy classes.** As long as your puppy is healthy it's okay to enrol them in a puppy class. The benefits far outweigh the very small risk of catching distemper from another puppy.

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