

Ask A Vet: Puppy Parvo

Sunday, March 2, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My family and I planning on adopting a puppy this spring and have heard a lot about parvo. What is parvo and why is it so devastating to puppies?

-Worried about Parvo

Dear Worried,

This is a very appropriate question for this time of year as there are soon to be many puppies available for adoption and sale. The clinical signs to monitor for in your puppy for a potential parvo-viral infection are lethargy (tiredness), fever (above 102.5°F by rectal temperature), vomiting, and diarrhea (particularly if it's bloody).

Parvo is a viral infection spread primarily in the feces of infected puppies, and is a major cause of puppy death, particularly if untreated. The virus specifically attacks rapidly dividing cells in the puppy's body, particularly those in the intestines and in the bone marrow. The damage done to the intestines leads to the vomiting and diarrhea signs. The damage in the bone marrow is typically to the different white blood cells produced there which help to fight off infections. Without a barrier in the gut to protect his/her body from bacteria and without white blood cells to fight off any of those bacteria, your puppy can develop a very significant bacterial infection on top of the viral infection. Frequently, that is what ends up killing the puppy.

If your veterinarian is suspicious of parvo, the most important thing is to keep your puppy isolated from other puppies. This virus is highly contagious and easily spread to other puppies. The first test that we perform is to test for the virus in the puppy's feces. If it comes back positive, we frequently begin a comprehensive treatment regimen. There will be variations between different doctors and practices, but the goals are all for the same purposes. Sometimes we will want to run blood work to determine how the puppy's bone marrow or other organs are affected. They will be placed on IV fluids with several broad spectrum antibiotics and anti-nausea medications. Typically aggressive treatment will continue for 5-7 days as needed depending on the puppy's needs. Frequently they will continue to be treated for another week with oral medications.

Treating parvo can be an expensive undertaking and sometimes it doesn't end well. For both of those reasons it is important to vaccinate your puppy, and complete the series of vaccines (depending on your veterinarian's recommendations).

Finally, it is important to know that the parvovirus is extremely stable in the environment and can persist for several months; meaning that if your puppy has parvo or if your puppy visits a home where another dog has had parvo, the virus can still be present and potentially infectious.

-Dr. Jason Heitzman