

Ask A Vet: Kennel Cough a Concern for Dog Owners

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Dear Doctor Weldy's,

My parent's dog recently had a hacking cough and now my dogs are both developing the same symptoms. Could this be kennel cough and if so how long are my dogs contagious?

Dear Reader,

This absolutely sounds suspicious for "kennel cough" or infectious tracheobronchitis. It is a highly contagious upper respiratory disease caused by several different viruses and bacteria. This syndrome is commonly referred to as kennel cough because it usually occurs after dogs have been kenneled in close quarters with other dogs. In my experience shelters and boarding kennels where the ventilation is less than ideal are the most common scenarios for infection. Symptoms usually develop 3-5 days later and consist of a dry, hacking cough with or without nasal drainage. Most people describe this as "something stuck in my dogs throat". It is similar to a chest cold in a person. Thankfully, most cases are fairly mild and the dog remains normal other than the discomfort of the cough and throat irritation. Some cases, however, can be more severe with fever, lethargy, and even pneumonia setting in. Most cases don't last more than a few days. In the more severe cases your veterinarian may need to use antibiotics in addition to supportive care to best deal with the disease. Infected dogs are highly contagious while they are showing symptoms, but in some cases have been found to be contagious up to three months later.

Kennel cough is a little unusual in the sense that it is typically caused by more than one infective agent. Most commonly, it is a combination of Bordetella bronchiseptica (bacteria) and parainfluenza or adenovirus(both viruses). Occasionally there can be other viruses involved or even Mycoplasma.

The good news is that there are effective vaccines for all the most common causes. These vaccines come in either injectable or intranasal form. Although it is not considered a core vaccine in most vaccination protocols, it should be given to any dog that may be in a kennel situation or may come in contact with other dogs regularly. Dogs that have a high exposure risk such as show dogs or dogs that are kenneled often should have the vaccine boosted every six months rather than annually. It is important to remember that even though the vaccine does not always prevent disease, it will lessen the severity.

If you notice your dog coughing regularly, it is important to have the condition checked by your veterinarian to determine the cause and come up with a treatment plan.

-Dr. Justin Sellon