

# Ask A Vet: Parvo Puppy in Peril

*Sunday, July 20, 2014*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My neighbor's puppy is sick with Parvovirus. Are my dogs at risk? What can you tell me about this illness?

Dear Reader,

If your dogs are current on vaccines, they are at very little risk of contracting this virus. Parvovirus is a common and very contagious disease that is usually life threatening if not treated quickly and aggressively. Commonly called "parvo", the virus most often affects unvaccinated or under-vaccinated dogs between 4 and 20 weeks of age. Older dogs can be affected, but 85% of cases are seen in dogs less than a year old.

Parvovirus is transmitted by contact with infected fecal particles. These particles can come from any person, animal or object that has been in an area where an infected dog has been. It is common for an unvaccinated dog to contract the virus from streets, parks or other areas that have large numbers of dogs visiting them.

Parvovirus affects rapidly growing cells such as the lining of the gastrointestinal tract and white blood cells. In very young puppies the virus can also infect the heart muscle, leading to lifelong cardiac problems in survivors.

A puppy that has parvo can show typical signs 3 to 14 days after exposure to the virus. Signs of illness can occur very quickly – as in "he was fine yesterday but wouldn't eat this morning and started vomiting this afternoon" – and progress from lethargy and decreased appetite to profuse vomiting, bloody diarrhea and life-threatening dehydration. Fever may or may not be present.

With treatment, survival rates are higher than 75%. Treatment has traditionally been hospitalization with intravenous fluids, antibiotics and anti-vomiting medication. This can become very costly, as up to a week of treatment may be needed. Another treatment option involves owners giving fluids under the skin at home 2 to 3 times a day, along with an injection of a long term antibiotic and anti-vomiting medication. Without treatment, survival rates are 10% to 15%.

Since a dog can shed parvovirus for up to 3 weeks after recovery, it is important to limit contact with other dogs for this time. Disinfection of the environment is also important during illness and after recovery. Bleach is very effective at killing the virus at a dilution of 1 to 30. Other disinfectants have become available, but be sure to use one that says it kills parvovirus on its label. As the virus can live for up to a year (some say longer) in the soil, it can be difficult or impossible to fully eradicate.

The best way to prevent your pet from this horrible disease is to make sure he is fully vaccinated as a puppy and has vaccines as recommended by your veterinarian. Puppies need a set of three or four vaccines given 3 to 4 weeks apart. As certain breeds seem to be more likely to contract parvo, you should talk to your vet about the best vaccine schedule for your puppy/dog.

-Dr. Teresa Alessandri