

Parvo In Dogs: Symptoms And Treatments

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If you've ever raised a puppy, no doubt you've been alerted to the importance of protecting them from parvo. But parvo isn't just a puppy illness—dogs of any age are susceptible to this highly contagious and potentially fatal virus.

The good news, according to the Merck Veterinary Manual, is with proper treatment 68% to 92% of dogs infected with parvo eventually recover.

Here is what you need to know about how dogs catch parvo, parvo symptoms, whether [pet insurance](#) covers treating it and steps you can take to prevent your dog from contracting the illness.

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What Is Parvo in Dogs?

Parvo is short for canine parvovirus (CPV). This viral infection causes inflammation of the intestines in dogs and puppies, resulting in acute diarrhea. In rarer cases, parvo in puppies also causes inflammation of the heart, or myocarditis, which can result in heart failure.

Parvo first appeared in Europe in the late 1970s. It's believed to be a genetic mutation of feline panleukopenia virus (FPV), a type of parvovirus that affects cats. Canine parvovirus can not only infect dogs, but also spreads among wild canine species like wolves and coyotes, as well as foxes, skunks and raccoons.

How Do Dogs Get Parvo?

Dogs can get parvo if they come into direct contact with infected feces or with an infected dog. But they can also get it indirectly if they come into contact with an object or surface that has been contaminated by feces infected with CPV, which can live inside of fecal matter for up to three weeks.

The virus can also spread on surfaces in kennels, food and water bowls, collars and leashes and clothing of people who have handled infected dogs. Under the right conditions, parvovirus can survive

on surfaces up to a year.

Which Dogs are Most At Risk for Parvo?

Unvaccinated puppies and dogs who haven't been fully vaccinated against parvo comprise the most vulnerable group. "Any dog can be infected, but those that are very young, very old, have compromised immune systems, or that are under or unvaccinated have the highest risk," says Dr. Jamie Whittenburg, D.V.M., veterinarian director for Senior Tail Waggers, an educational website about aging pets.

"Dogs that go outside of the home to public spaces, such as dog parks, are at higher risk of encountering the virus," Whittenburg says. It's also believed some dog breeds are at increased risk of contracting parvo, including:

American pit bull terriers

Doberman pinschers

English springer spaniels

German shepherds

Labrador retrievers

Rottweilers

How Long are Dogs With Parvo Contagious?

Dogs who have been exposed to parvo can start transmitting the virus two weeks before they start showing signs or symptoms. They continue to be contagious for up to two weeks after recovery.

This is why it's important to isolate your dog if there is any likelihood that they could have contracted parvo. Keep a close eye on them and contact your vet immediately if they develop symptoms.

What Is the Life Expectancy of Dogs With Parvo?

Without treatment, parvo is usually fatal. Dogs and puppies typically die within 48 to 72 hours of developing symptoms.

That said, the majority of dogs and puppies who receive proper care and treatment recover within a week and go on to live healthy lives. "Older, healthy, partially vaccinated and larger dogs tend to have a better prognosis," Whittenberg says. "Treatment received also matters. Those that are treated early in the course of the disease, and aggressively, tend to fare better."

Symptoms and Behaviors of Dogs With Parvo

Dogs who've contracted parvo can be asymptomatic, meaning they show no symptoms of the disease, although remain contagious. Stress may trigger symptoms to appear, and other digestive infections can make symptoms worse.

It's also important to note that symptoms of parvo can be caused by other health conditions. Veterinary testing is required to accurately diagnose canine parvovirus. Because of the seriousness of this disease, you should contact a vet as soon as your dog exhibits symptoms.

The first signs of parvo in puppies and dogs include:

Lethargy

Reduced appetite

Vomiting

As the disease quickly progresses, these more serious symptoms soon follow:

Severe diarrhea

Blood or mucus in stool

Fever

Abdominal pain

Dehydration

Weakness

Is Parvo Treatment Covered by Pet Insurance?

Whether parvo is covered by pet insurance depends on what your specific plan covers.

As an acute, non-recurring illness, most pet accident and illness plans will reimburse the costs of diagnosing and treating parvo in dogs, including hospitalization, as long as it's not deemed a pre-existing condition.

Additionally, as a core vaccination for dogs and puppies, most pet health and wellness coverage plans will cover the cost of vaccinations.

Review the terms and conditions of your pet insurance policy or contact your provider for details on what your plan covers.

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What Are the Stages of Parvo in Dogs?

Without timely intervention, canine parvovirus typically follows this trajectory from initial exposure to illness and either recovery or death:

Stage 1: The dog comes into contact with the virus and ingests it.

Stage 2: The virus incubates in the body for three to seven days. During this time, the virus attacks the tonsils and lymph nodes inside the throat and invades white blood cells, rapidly dividing into multiple virus copies before entering the bloodstream.

Once there, the virus attacks the bone marrow, where it destroys immune cells and weakens the immune system. It also attacks the lining of the small intestine, breaking down the barrier that protects the gut from bacterial infection and fluid loss.

Stage 3: Signs of illness appear as the dog responds to the attack on their gastrointestinal tract with nausea and vomiting. Severe diarrhea soon follows. Without quick intervention, the dog may die from a combination of dehydration, shock to the system and septic toxins being released into the bloodstream.

How to Test for Parvo in Dogs

There is no at-home test or diagnostic procedure for parvo. Because the main symptoms of parvo can also be caused by a number of other health conditions, it's highly recommended to have your vet test your dog's feces for canine parvovirus prior to making a diagnosis.

Typically, veterinarians test for parvovirus using enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). This test works similarly to a pregnancy test by changing color if the presence of parvovirus is detected.

Some vets also do a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test on stool samples. This test is capable of detecting parvovirus DNA within infected stool samples. It's more accurate than the ELISA test, but must be sent away to a PCR lab, so it takes longer to get a result.

Treatment Costs for Dogs With Parvo

The costs associated with diagnosing and treating parvo in dogs can vary widely based on the following factors:

Location

The veterinarian or clinic providing the treatment

Severity of the illness

Whether your dog needs to be hospitalized

The length of hospitalization

The size and weight of the dog might also impact the cost of any medications used to treat parvo symptoms like nausea or diarrhea.

Some experts estimate the cost of a test to diagnose parvovirus ranging from \$40 to \$100, not including your vet's office visit fee. Additional blood testing can run around \$130, while an abdominal x-ray, if needed, will cost an additional \$150 to \$300.

Treatment involves mainly isolation and supportive care to treat the symptoms, as well as infection and dehydration. If your dog tests positive for parvo, here are estimates of what you can expect to pay for treatment:

Hospitalization: \$600 per night

IV fluids: \$220

Antibiotics: \$25 to \$30

Anti-nausea medication: \$10 to \$20

Anti-diarrhea medication: \$10 to \$15

Less severe cases in which the dog can isolate at home and receive out-patient care will cost between \$265 and \$285 to treat, on average.

Cases that require hospitalization will start around \$865 on the low end, assuming only one night of hospitalization is required. However, more severe cases may require several days of hospitalization; for example, a dog hospitalized for four days could incur treatment costs of \$2,685 or more.

Preventing Parvo in Puppies and Dogs

Preventing your dog or puppy from getting parvo involves a three-pronged approach:

1. Vaccinate your dog. The best way to protect your dog from parvo is to keep their vaccinations up to date. "Vaccinations are incredibly effective at preventing serious illness from the parvovirus," Whittenberg says. "Ideally, a dog will receive a full set of vaccinations, which will confer the best immunity possible." The vaccine for canine parvovirus is included in the [core vaccinations for dogs and puppies](#).

Puppies should be given their first vaccination when they're around 8 weeks old, and again every two to four weeks until they reach 16 to 20 weeks of age, followed by another booster when they reach a

year old. Afterwards, dogs generally receive a booster for parvovirus every three years.

2. Clean and disinfect potentially contaminated areas. Parvovirus is resistant to most household cleaners and disinfectants. The most effective disinfectant for killing parvo is a 1:30 solution of bleach and water.

After cleaning all fecal matter from the contaminated object or area, let it soak in the bleach solution for at least 10 minutes in order to kill any traces of the virus.

3. Avoid risky areas and activities. Keep your dog or puppy away from dog parks, pet stores, doggy daycare and other public places that get a lot of dog traffic, especially if they're not fully vaccinated or are immunocompromised.

Puppy parents should exercise caution with socialization activities like obedience classes and puppy playdates. Most reputable obedience training facilities thoroughly clean and disinfect the puppy training area between classes, but it's a good idea to interview the training staff and check references and reviews before choosing a puppy class.

And while playdates with other dogs and puppies are an excellent way to socialize your puppy, only let your pup play or come into contact with dogs who you know have been fully vaccinated.

Is Parvo Common in Senior Dogs?

Dogs can get parvo at any age. While it's most commonly seen in puppies, senior dogs with immune systems that are weakened by age or illness are also highly susceptible, especially if their vaccinations have lapsed. But healthy and hardy senior dogs who are fully vaccinated are at no more risk of severe parvo than younger dogs.

Can Cats or People Catch Parvo From Dogs?

While there are versions of parvovirus that affect humans and cats, each virus is specific to one species. If your dog gets infected with canine parvovirus, they won't be able to pass parvo to you or your cat, or vice versa.

Bottom Line

Parvo in dogs is a potentially fatal virus transmitted by contact with infected feces and surfaces. Parvo symptoms include lethargy, vomiting and diarrhea. If you think your dog might have parvo, you should seek veterinary help to test for parvovirus and begin immediate treatment.

Other Common Health Conditions in Dogs:

[Guide to Addison's Disease In Dogs](#)

[Guide to Bloat In Dogs](#)

[Guide to Coccidia In Dogs](#)

[Guide to Cushing's Disease In Dogs](#)

[Guide to Diarrhea In Dogs](#)

[Guide to Distemper In Dogs](#)

[Guide to Ear Infection in Dogs](#)

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[Guide to Feline Leukemia](#)

[Guide to Giardia In Dogs](#)

[Guide to Heart Murmur In Dogs](#)

[Guide to Hip Dysplasia In Dogs](#)

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