

Parvo Virus - Frequently Asked Questions

1- What is parvo?

Parvo, is a serious disease in puppies caused by a virus that attacks intestinal lining and white blood cells. Normally, the intestinal lining absorbs nutrients and water into the blood stream while providing a barrier that prevents bacteria from entering the blood. White blood cells fight infection.

Severe dehydration results when parvovirus destroys the cells of the intestinal lining, and with this protective barrier damaged, puppies are at increased risk for bacterial infection. When parvovirus destroys white blood cells, puppies lose their ability to mount a strong defense against viral and bacterial infections.

The good news is that after recovery the intestines regenerate their lining over time, usually without permanent damage. In addition, bone marrow will replace the destroyed white blood cells. Survival from parvo rarely results in long-term health issues.

2- Is parvo only a puppy disease?

Parvo is primarily a disease of puppies – adult dogs are rarely susceptible.

3- What are the signs of parvo?

Puppies become very quiet and lethargic. They may drool excessively and have a tender abdomen. Vomiting, bloody diarrhea and fever are the advanced symptoms and cause the severe dehydration associated with parvo.

4- Can people catch parvo?

Canine parvovirus is not contagious to people, but always wash your hands after handling a sick pet.

5- How is it spread?

Parvovirus is hardy and spreads easily. It does not require dog-to-dog contact to spread. The virus can live in the environment (soil) for years, persist in neighborhood grass and be transported on shoes or clothing.

6- How soon after exposure will symptoms show?

Symptoms appear four to seven days after exposure.

7- How long is my puppy contagious?

The virus is found in the stool within three to four days after exposure (often before symptoms appear) and puppies will continue to shed the virus for up to two weeks. The feces can infect other puppies and contaminate the environment during this time.

8- Are any breeds at greater risk?

The Rottweiler, Doberman, English Springer spaniel, Pit bull, German Shepard and Lab are at increased risk. Rottweilers tend to get sicker and take longer to recover.

9- How is parvo treated?

Puppies with parvo should be hospitalized. They often have life-threatening dehydration and require intravenous (IV) fluid treatment. There are no effective anti-viral drugs, but your veterinarian can provide the needed supportive care while the body rids itself of the virus. This includes antibiotics to help with bacterial infections, IV fluids, anti-nausea medicines and nutritional support. Puppies with advanced cases of parvo may require plasma or blood transfusions. Some puppies have more mild cases and may only need short term supportive care. Most are hospitalized for three to four days.

If hospitalization cannot be done, puppies can be treated on an outpatient basis with subcutaneous fluids and antibiotics, but this therapy is not as effective as hospitalization.

Owners should be extremely careful of what they read on the Internet. There are many websites proclaiming to have “cures for parvo,” but a true understanding of the disease makes it clear that fluid support is needed above all else. Death results from severe dehydration and bacterial infections, which can only be treated with proper medical care.

10- What is the prognosis for parvo?

With full hospitalization and treatment, greater than 90 percent of puppies will survive. The prognosis for outpatient treatment is about 50:50 and varies with the severity of infection. Without therapy, many puppies die.

11- Can my puppy catch parvo again?

The good news is NO. If a puppy survives parvovirus, reinfection is extremely unlikely.

12- Do puppies need to continue having vaccinations after recovery?

Yes. Puppy vaccination series and adult boosters are important protection against several diseases, not just parvo.

13- What can decrease the risk of parvo?

Complete all recommended puppy shots on time and follow-up with boosters as advised by your veterinarian. Most puppies who catch parvo do not receive their complete vaccination series on time. Unfortunately, parvo is such a hardy virus that some puppies who receive all the appropriate puppy shots from their veterinarian and are kept in a contained environment still succumb to parvo.

Some doctors recommend that puppies not be exposed to public places until at least five months of age or older. Consult with your veterinarian as to specific precautions you can take to limit your puppy’s chances of getting parvo.

14- Why should I have a veterinarian vaccinate my puppy?

Vaccines can be inactivated if they are incorrectly shipped, stored or administered. A licensed and knowledgeable veterinarian ensures that appropriate measures are used.