

'Wash Your Paws and Pass the Tissue'.....Bernadine Cruz, DVM

Your dog has a cough, could be sneezing, has a runny nose and a touch of malaise, could it be allergies, a simple cold, kennel cough or canine influenza? What is canine influenza? Could you catch it? How about your cat or ferret...is it susceptible?

Dogs can be affected by myriad conditions that can present with very similar respiratory signs. Trying to determine the exact cause can be very difficult to virtually impossible. The recent outbreak of canine influenza in the greater Chicago area has dog owners ringing up their veterinarians with queries.

Influenza is a contagious viral disease. The strain previously known in dogs in the U.S. was Type A H3N8. As with human influenza, strains in dogs can easily mutate/change. According to researchers at Cornell University, the type found in the recent Illinois outbreak was H3N2. It had never been detected in the United States until this spate of illnesses. It is known to affect dogs in Asia (Thailand, Korea and China). How it spread to the Chicago area is unknown at this time.

Canine flu (canine influenza) is not new. It was first recognized in Florida, in racing greyhounds in 2004. This flu had jumped species from horses, where it had been causing respiratory distress for over 40 years to dogs. Since that time it has been diagnosed in 30 states ranging from Massachusetts to Arizona. Why are dogs contracting canine influenza at the high rates that are being reported? U.S. dogs are immunological virgins when it comes to influenza viruses. Their immune systems have not have previous experience with this diseases so they are unable to resist their effects. Once exposed, the majority of dogs are able to mount the needed defenses and get the infection under control.

H3N8 as well as H3N2 is disseminated like the human variety of flu via aerosolized respiratory particles and contaminated objects. How to keep your pet safe? Follow your mom's advice...wash your hands and follow good hygiene. You can't get your dog to wash its paws but you can be sure to keep it away from other dogs when it is experiencing respiratory distress signs. It is advised to keep it from going on play dates, using doggie day care or visiting the grooming salon if it is ill. Concerned that your dog could contract the flu? How can you prevent it? Though there is a vaccine for Bordetella bronchiseptica/parainfluenza virus complex and canine influenza H3N8, no vaccine is 100% effective. It is not known if the H3N8 strain will cross protect against the newly emerged strain of H3N2. Keep toys and bowls from serving as a source of infection for other pets. Hot water and routine laundry temperatures will help to keep cross contamination under control. Canine influenza has never been shown to affect people. H3N2 is has sickened cats.

What makes canine influenza difficult to diagnosis its mimicry of other common respiratory diseases such as kennel cough complex and allergic airway disease. The majority of affected dogs will demonstrate only mild signs of illness and require no care or minimal supportive therapies and will fully recover in 2 to 3 weeks. Approximately 20% of pets made ill by H3N8 will develop more serious signs that can proceed to pneumonia and less than 10% succumb to the virus. As with human viral infections, antibiotics are not the first line of defense. Antibiotics do not kill viruses. Which treatment is

appropriate for your particular pet will depend on your pet's overall health, immune status and your veterinarian's discretion.

There is no table side quick test available for detecting H3N8 virus in your pet. Immune titers can be run and involve testing a sample of respiratory secretions at the onset of the disease and several weeks later. An increase in the titer will confirm that the dog was exposed to the disease.

If your dog is coughing, sneezing, has a runny nose and you are concerned, the best thing to do is call your veterinarian for an appointment. DO NOT bring your pet directly into the reception area. Call from your car and let them know that you have arrived so they can escort you safely into and out of the hospital. You don't want to infect other pets. Have more questions, just ask your veterinarian or go to www.AVMA.org or www.cdc.gov/healthypets