

What Mushers Should Know About Canine Influenza Virus

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One Nasty Bug

Canine Flu is a new pathogen that is on the rise in Colorado and all dogs are vulnerable to the bug; shape, size, breed or age does not matter. Dogs do not have a natural resistance to the virus and at this point in time there is no vaccine induced immunity either. Nearly 100% of dogs exposed to the virus become infected and only eighty percent of those infected show symptoms of the virus. This virus can lead to death so, taking preventive measures is very important for maintaining a better-quality level of general health in your kennel.

A Brief History of the Virus

The Canine Influenza Virus is believed to be a mutation off of the Equine Influenza Virus; this new strain has been present for only a couple of years. At this time, there is no evidence proving whether or not the virus can spread to humans or other animals besides dogs--this virus is still in its early stages of development. The virus made its first appearances in Greyhound racing circuits and then spread to kennels, shelters, dog parks, and other places from there. The virus is a respiratory pathogen that causes clinical syndromes which mimic those of Kennel Cough.

The original outbreak was high in numbers and left 8 out of 22 (36%) that were infected, dead. Today, the actual fatality rate is fairly low and in reality many dogs die from pneumonia that was triggered by the virus. Nearly all documented cases have shown a mild spectrum of symptoms although, occasionally severe symptoms do occur and pneumonia can set in. Reports do show evidence relating to dogs with a deep chest being more at risk and having the potential to have severe symptoms.

Symptoms

Early stages of Canine Influenza do resemble those of kennel cough, usually showing first signs from 2-5 days after exposure. At first, one can expect continual coughing that can last up to twenty days as well as a low fever. If untreated, the virus can create an acute respiratory infection. Signs of secondary bacterial infections may be thick green nasal discharge, high fever (104-106°F), or GI tract trouble. If not treated, more severe symptoms (such as pneumonia) can occur. Fluid therapy and antibiotics are very important methods of treatment.

If you suspect your dogs have been exposed to Canine Influenza, PLEASE do not take them to training areas or races where they may expose other dogs!!!

Prevention

It is very important that your dog's immune system is strong to help fight the virus. Good nutrition/supplements, health care, and exercise are essential for a strong immune system that can take action against any virus.

The virus spreads by aerosolized respiratory secretions, infected objects and even by humans that have been in contact with infected dogs. Since there is no immunity or type of vaccine, dog owners must take pre-emptive measures into their own hands. If any form of contact is made to any given infected dog, frequent disinfecting can kill the virus. Lysol spray works well for disinfecting your vehicle and before entering your house a tub of bleach water works well for stepping into to disinfect the bottoms of your shoes. If you have been around other dogs, immediately put clothes in the washing machine and then shower before making contact with any of your dogs. Repetitive precautionary practices will assure that your kennel will be better off. To date, the best known disinfectant is Bleach and some alcohol based disinfectants also work well.

Because initial indications of infection mimic kennel cough, it is worthwhile to vaccinate your dogs for bordetella. Then if your dogs show respiratory symptoms, your vet can more easily rule out kennel cough and start aggressive treatment for Canine Flu.

If kennel owners are more aware of Canine Influenza then our dogs are better off and we can take quick action if there is an outbreak. There have been more and more cases popping up in Wyoming and other states in the west. Near the beginning of October, Colorado has seen the number of cases grow in the Evergreen and Conifer areas. Kennels and shelters close to and in Aurora have had to depopulate their numbers due to the virus. Other kennels, shelters and veterinary hospitals are preparing themselves for more cases - not just in Colorado, but nation wide.