



“KENNEL COUGH” (Infectious Tracheobronchitis)

What is kennel cough? Kennel cough is a contagious respiratory disease of dogs, manifested by coughing, much like a cold or flu in people. Several types of canine respiratory viruses have been identified as contributing to development of kennel cough. These viruses can damage the respiratory epithelium (cells which line the respiratory tract) and lead to a secondary bacterial infection. One type of bacterium, *Bordetella bronchiseptica*, can cause kennel cough without the “help” of a viral organism.

Can my dog still get kennel cough even if never in a kennel? Yes. As kennel cough is a highly contagious disease *any* exposure to an infected animal may lead to illness. While kennels are one location where dogs from different environments meet, other examples include pet stores, animal shelters, parks, obedience classes, and/or grooming facilities. Note that exposure may occur long before any animal is coughing, just as you may be exposed to a friend’s cold before any symptoms are seen.

What are the signs of kennel cough? Kennel cough can affect any age dog but tends to be more severe in those younger than 6 months. Clinical signs vary according to severity of infection. In mild infections there is a cough in an otherwise healthy animal that can begin about 4 days after exposure. The cough can be dry and hacking, soft and dry, or moist and hacking. The cough may also be accompanied by gagging. Some people mistakenly think something is caught in the dog’s throat. Excitement, exercise, or pressure on the trachea (i.e., pulling on the leash) can induce a coughing fit. In severe infections the cough may be accompanied by a fever and/or nasal discharge. Affected pets may be lethargic and unwilling to eat. Certain severe infections may progress to pneumonia.

Diagnosis of kennel cough is often made through the dog’s history and clinical signs, as well as by elimination of other possible causes of coughing (a “diagnosis of exclusion”). Chest x-rays may be taken to rule out pneumonia as well as other causes of coughing. The majority of dogs with kennel cough have few abnormalities on their radiographs. In severe cases, a procedure called a tracheal wash may be recommended to isolate the causative organism and to determine its sensitivity to antibiotics.

How is kennel cough treated? Mild cases are often treated on an outpatient basis. Rest is recommended for 14 to 21 days. In certain cases antibiotics and/or cough suppressants may be used (suppressants are NOT used in cases of pneumonia). Vaporizers can be helpful to some dogs. Most recover within 10 to 14 days. Severe cases may need hospitalization for monitoring and supportive care.

Can kennel cough be prevented? Vaccines are available to help prevent or reduce the severity of kennel cough infection. Ideally these should be given 2-3 weeks prior to boarding to ensure adequate protection. The many strains of kennel cough make it difficult for a single vaccine to protect against all infections (similar to the human influenza vaccine), however, a vaccine may make an infection less severe. Kennels or groomers may require a kennel cough vaccination in an effort to decrease the likelihood of the disease. It should be noted that there is also a (separate) vaccination available against canine influenza virus, another illness that can produce symptoms similar to kennel cough.

It is important to keep sick dogs isolated from healthy ones in an attempt to stop the spread of the disease. Kennels in which an outbreak has occurred should be cleaned with a 1:30 dilution of bleach and water or a chlorhexadine solution. Kennels may need to be evacuated for 1-2 weeks.

In summary, kennel cough is a highly contagious infection that may be acquired anywhere your pet is exposed to an infected dog. Vaccination may aid in preventing or limiting its signs.