
DISTEMPER HANDOUT FOR FOSTERS AND ADOPTERS

I. DISTEMPER GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Distemper is a common, but very serious airborne virus that can affect unvaccinated dogs, ferrets, and a handful of wild species like raccoons, wolves, foxes, and skunks. It initially attacks the dog's tonsils and lymph nodes and replicates itself there for about a week. It then attacks the respiratory, urogenital, gastrointestinal, and/or nervous systems.

If APA! is able to treat the symptoms of Distemper prior to the neurological stage, the prognosis is often very good. But in our experience, once the virus attacks a dog's nervous system, the prognosis can be poor and can often be fatal. However, we have had successful outcomes even after a dog develops neurological symptoms; some of our pups that reached this stage have survived with a few side effects - such as muscle tics - or none at all, and gone on to lead very normal lives.

Most shelters and veterinary clinics in the United States euthanize for this disease because it was once thought to be untreatable. Through our work at APA!, we have found that it is treatable. However, the recovery process can be lengthy, and in rare cases Distemper can reoccur.

II. TO WHOM IS DISTEMPER CONTAGIOUS?

A. Humans?

Distemper is not contagious to humans; however, under certain limited circumstances, Distemper can be spread by humans via secondary surfaces like shoes or clothes.

B. Animals?

Distemper mainly occurs in dogs; it can also affect ferrets and some species of wild animal such as raccoons, wolves, foxes, and skunks. However, it is not contagious to domestic cats. Removing feces from the yard and not leaving water bowls out at night will help eliminate accidental spread to wildlife.

III. HOW IS DISTEMPER SPREAD?

Distemper is very contagious. It is spread to unvaccinated dogs just like the common cold, through contact with secretions. Sneezing, coughing, nasal secretions, saliva, snot, etc. are all modes of transmission. Unvaccinated dogs can also get Distemper through sharing water bowls, touching noses, or being in the same place at the same time as dogs with Distemper.

Fortunately, Distemper does not live very long in the environment. The virus dies very quickly - within minutes - as soon as it dries. It lives longer if it has a host or is in water or on wet surfaces, such as in food bowls or on water-soaked toys. If an item is thoroughly dry, we consider it safe.

IV. PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF DISTEMPER

The Distemper vaccine (DAPP/DHLPP) is VERY effective! Distemper is mostly seen in dogs from shelters that don't vaccinate immediately upon intake or have poor vaccine and isolation protocols. We know that the vaccine provides immediate partial immunity, and full immunity in 3 days. The dogs and puppies that get vaccines at intake - before entering the shelter - and are exposed hours later may still get diarrhea/pneumonia but typically don't develop neurological symptoms.

As long as your resident dog(s) are healthy and current on their vaccinations, they should not contract Distemper. If you take home a dog who is Distemper exposed, on Distemper watch, or has Distemper, your personal dog(s) and any dog(s) that may come in contact (even through a fence) with your foster/adopted dog **must** be fully vaccinated.

A fully-vaccinated dog is a dog who has received at least 2 DHLPP or DAPP vaccines, one of which was given in the last 3 years and at the age of 4 months or older, and THAT:

- IS NOT immunocompromised (happens in geriatric [elderly] dogs); AND
- IS NOT on prednisone or steroids; AND
- DOES NOT have cancer, Cushing's Disease, or any other severe disease that is compromising their health.

For dogs that are Distemper exposed, on Distemper watch, or have Distemper, it is important that you follow the following precautions until our Medical Team clears the dog.

- Do not let the pup interact with any dogs that you are not 100% sure are fully vaccinated.
- Do not take the pup out in public, let them sniff other dogs through a fence, or share water bowls with other dogs.
- Do not leave water or food bowls outside where they can be accessed by wildlife or other dogs.

V. DIAGNOSIS AND SYMPTOMS

Unfortunately, there is no reliable, economically-feasible Distemper test that APA! can conduct, so when APA! diagnoses a pup with Distemper, it's based on symptoms.

To diagnose, APA! looks for whether a dog is exhibiting multiple symptoms on the list below and/or when neurological symptoms develop.

Part of what makes Distemper such a serious illness is that it can attack multiple systems at the same time; that also means that the list of symptoms is long. In addition, with Distemper it is often difficult to predict how symptoms will present.

Symptoms of Distemper may include:

- Cough/chest congestion, snotty nose/severe nasal discharge, nasal congestion, pneumonia
- Not eating/loss of interest in food, vomiting
- Extreme lethargy
- Diarrhea (sometimes bloody)
- Eye discharge/decreased tear production/squinting/not wanting to open eyes/crust around the eyes
- Ear infections
- Fever (differentiates it from Kennel Cough)
- Dandruff, yeasty/infected skin, change in skin condition or foul odor (even after bathing)
- Temporary paralysis
- Crying out in pain or disorientation
- Inability to walk straight or giving the appearance of being off balance
- Hard or flaky/peeling nose or paw pads (usually not immediate)
- Seizures (usually not immediate)
- Night terrors (usually not immediate)
- Twitching/tics/tremors or other neurologic symptoms (usually not immediate; the only symptom that typically lasts longer than 2 weeks)

**Twitching - Twitching can be considered a separate symptom since it can be semi-permanent. Only a twitch that is changing, worsening, or new should be considered a new symptom. If a rhythmic,

unchanging Distemper twitch is present, it may be a longer term, residual symptom of the virus that may last 1-2 years.

VI. TREATMENT, MEDICATIONS, AND GENERAL PROGNOSIS

Distemper is a virus, which means it can't be cured. Instead, we do everything we can to treat the symptoms until the virus passes.

Because it can affect so many different bodily systems, and because our treatment protocols are constantly evolving as we learn more about Distemper, no two dogs will get exactly the same treatment.

Most dogs that are on Distemper Watch or have Distemper will take antibiotics to treat URI symptoms. They may also take medicine to increase appetite or alleviate diarrhea or cough. Our Medical Team may also administer Distemper Serum and/or vitamins that we have found effective.

If the pup develops neurological symptoms, he or she will be given one or more medicines to control convulsions or help them feel more comfortable.

Prognosis is difficult to predict because the Distemper virus acts differently in each dog. In general, the older the dog, the higher the survival rate. In our experience, we have observed a 50% survival rate in puppies and an 80% survival rate in adults.

VII. PROGRESSION & POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

We use the following 3 labels to designate Distemper risk/status:

DISTEMPER EXPOSED: This label means that a dog was near a dog with Distemper or comes from a highly-suspect shelter. It also generally means there are no signs of Distemper. If the dog has no new or worsening symptoms for 14 days, then they are eligible for clearance.

DISTEMPER WATCH: When a dog is elevated to Distemper watch, this means the dog is exhibiting symptoms that may indicate Distemper but are not 100% consistent with the disease. These can be as simple as kennel cough or diarrhea but since actual Distemper can begin with very benign symptoms such as a mild cough, we will treat any Distemper exposed dog with symptoms of any kind as Distemper watch. The large majority of our Distemper watch dogs are taking medications to treat those symptoms, and most of them will get better as the medications start to work, and they do not actually have Distemper. If the dog has no new or worsening symptoms for 14 days, then they are eligible for clearance.

ACTIVE DISTEMPER: If your dog's Distemper watch symptoms progress, don't go away, or come back, then we will begin active Distemper treatment where we try to prevent the disease from spreading with immune system boosters, continue antibiotics, and treat all new symptoms accordingly. Active Distemper can take a few months to resolve, and as stated earlier, we treat any symptom that arises. There is no "one size fits all treatment" since the disease is so variable. The Medical Team will stay in close contact with all fosters and adopters during this stage. If the dog has no new or worsening symptoms for 30 days, then they are eligible for clearance.

VIII. DECONTAMINATION/SANITIZATION

Distemper does not live long in the environment, but it is still an infectious disease. If you have a dog that is Distemper exposed, on Distemper Watch, or has Distemper, we recommend being vigilant about picking up poop, washing dishes the dog uses, laundering beds and towels, and cleaning with a disinfectant, such as Lysol or Simple Green.

IX. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Other than the information set forth in this handout, what do I need to do or what set up do I need to have to take a distemper-labeled dog?

Not much, just bestow upon them all the love you would normally give any dog. Being in a home is one of the best medications you can give to them! Watch for any signs of illness and report them to us immediately. Make sure they get the medications they were prescribed, and when those medications run out, contact us to see if you need a refill. Make sure to prevent contact within 10 feet of other dogs. Check your yard to prevent "through the fence" contact with neighbors' dogs. Pick up water bowls outside so wildlife won't be exposed. Other than that, just give lots of TLC and rest. You should have also received our [Distemper Agreement for Fosters and Adopters](#), so please make sure to follow the instructions in this document.

Can I take other dogs after having a distemper-labeled dog?

Yes, but only after the Distemper-labeled dog is gone OR if the new dog is well vaccinated against Distemper (ask us first). Unlike the Parvo virus, the Distemper virus doesn't stay in the environment for very long, so as soon as one dog is gone, the next dog won't get it as long as there is no standing water anywhere. The Distemper virus is spread like a cold, so think about how you might catch a cold in a busy place - it is usually from close contact with someone (e.g., next to you on an airplane or sitting across a table from you), not from across the room or going into a restaurant/hotel after the last guests left that had a cold.

Is there anything I should do after taking the dog into my home?

Just make sure that you know the vaccination history of any dog that will come within 10 feet of your Distemper-labeled dog. If you are not 100 percent sure a dog is fully vaccinated, do not let it have access to your Distemper-label dog, even for a second. Other than that, there is really nothing unique to do that you would not do with another dog.

Is there anything I should avoid doing with the dog?

Avoid any contact (within 10 feet) of other dogs that you don't know FOR SURE have been well-vaccinated against Distemper. So don't go out to dog parks, pet stores, vets, restaurants, cafes etc. As with any puppy, dogs under 4 months of age cannot go for walks, because they are not fully vaccinated against Parvo and we need to generally limit their exposure to germs. You can take adult Distemper-label dogs on walks, but only if you can guarantee there will be no interaction with any other dogs and if you pick up all poop. Also, since your pup might be fighting off a virus, it is generally best to not go running or do anything too strenuous so they can recuperate.

Can it affect other pets?

Distemper can spread to dogs that are not well vaccinated and ferrets. If you have pet ferrets, you should not foster or adopt a Distemper-labeled dog.

Can I carry Distemper around on my clothes?

No, just like a cold, the Distemper virus will die immediately when dry. As long as you don't have a big swab of saliva on your shoes or clothes, you will not carry the virus.

Can a friend's/neighbor's pet(s) get Distemper from me?

Ask them if their dogs are up to date on vaccines. If your Distemper-labeled dog gets within 10 feet of their dog, and their dog is not well vaccinated against Distemper, there is a risk of transmission. Otherwise, it is very safe. If you can check those two boxes, there is extremely little risk that your friend's/neighbor's dog will get Distemper from your Distemper-labeled dog.

My dog did not receive a DAPP/DHLPP vaccine within the last year but received a 3-year DAPP/DHLPP vaccine within the last 3 years. Will that protect them from Distemper?

Yes.

My dog did not receive DAPP/DHLPP vaccines two weeks apart in the last year, but has been up-to-date on vaccines for a few years. Will that protect her from Distemper?

Yes.

When should I call the Clinic?

Please only call the Clinic with emergencies. Otherwise, please communicate with us via email.

Can this dog make me or my kids sick?

No, Distemper is not contagious in any form to people.

Should I feed the dog something specific?

Since they may or may not be trying to fight off a virus, we recommend a good-quality diet, like food from a higher-quality brand like Castor & Pollux. We have also tried a raw food diet for dogs that have active Distemper, because the more pure nutrition of raw food may benefit them, but really anything high quality is appropriate. If the dog will not eat, we recommend blending high quality canned food and water to force feed with a syringe to keep caloric intake up.

Should I limit the dog's activity?

Yes, we recommend no strenuous exercise (like jogging or hiking) and no time outside on hot days. We want the pups to rest while we watch them.

Can the dog be left alone in my home? If so, for how long?

Yes, unless instructed otherwise, they should fit into your schedule. If they are on three-times-a-day meds, give the first dose in the AM, the second dose in the early PM (e.g., after work), and the third dose at bedtime. We do not expect you to stay home from work/school.

Will I need to make frequent trips to the Clinic with/for this dog?

Hopefully not, but it depends on whether or not the pup gets very sick. If so, we try to accommodate your schedule and send as many things home as possible to prevent frequent trips. Please talk with our vet techs about your needs; we are here to help!

Do I need to do any special cleaning either before or after I bring a Distemper-labeled dog home?

No, we recommend the same for any dog. Clean bowls, laundry, and toys (especially those that hold saliva, like kongs). Washing items in your washing machine works well; special disinfectants are not necessary.

What happens if my Distemper exposed or Distemper watch dog gets Distemper?

The Medical Team will walk you through every step. Distemper does different things to different dogs, so while the typical "Active Distemper" dog will have pneumonia and some anorexia, others may have nervous system symptoms, such as wobbliness or even a seizure. Our Medical Team will treat any and all symptoms and give your pup the best chance of beating the odds.