

It seems every time you turn around these days you hear or read about Influenza. On a global level, the avian, or “bird” flu has officials worried about a deadly pandemic. Nationally, with the flu season just around the corner, news reports reveal that the manufacturer of the vaccine for the “regular” flu may not meet its anticipated vaccine production levels. And now we hear about an influenza virus that can infect dogs. Let’s review what is known about this new canine virus and how it may affect your canine companion.

Our understanding of this new disease is, as they say, a work in progress. Based on recent from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we have much to learn about this virus. We hope to have more information in the weeks and months ahead.

Over the past 2 years researchers from the University of Florida’s College of Veterinary Medicine, The Cornell University’s Animal Health Diagnostic Center, The National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and other research facilities have been looking into a new respiratory disease in dogs. This illness is unique in that the causative agent is a previously un-recognized influenza virus. Initial investigations have concluded that the new canine virus likely originated from horse influenza virus which has been around for decades. Small genetic mutations in the horse flu virus have enabled it to infect dogs. The distribution and prevalence of the disease in the American dog population is not known at this time. Interestingly, some have wondered if canine influenza virus can infect humans in the same way that avian flu can. The CDC says that the risk of the canine virus infecting people is low, but they continue to monitor the situation closely.

Dogs infected by the canine influenza virus will show a variety of symptoms ranging from life threatening pneumonia to no symptoms at all. Though there is some debate about the actual numbers, the consensus opinion suggests a rather low mortality (death) rate-somewhere in the range of 5-8%. Initial symptoms are cough, runny nose, and fever. In many respects this disease may mimic “kennel cough”, a common syndrome causing coughing and gagging. Usually dogs with “kennel cough” will cough and gag a lot, but otherwise seem to feel fine. Canine influenza infection can, like “kennel cough”, be a mild syndrome; but it has the potential for more advanced and serious consequences.

Any dog with a cough should be examined by a veterinarian. Keep in mind that there are many possible causes for coughing in dogs. If canine flu is suspected, your veterinarian will recommend appropriate therapy. This is usually supportive in nature such as antibiotics, rest, limited exposure to other dogs, and in some cases hospitalization. Why, you ask, are antibiotics used for a viral disease? After all, antibiotics only treat bacterial infection. You’re right; the antibiotics are used in canine flu patients to treat serious secondary bacterial infections (usually pneumonia) that can worsen a dog’s condition. Ultimately, the vast majority of these cases recover completely.

Obviously, preventing the disease would be the best way to go. No vaccine is currently available, but work is underway.

Simple precautions can help keep your dog safe. There is no pressing need at this time to isolate your dog, or limit you normal routines of walks, grooming or other outings. But it wouldn’t hurt to keep your eyes open and avoid letting your dog near dogs that appear ill (especially if they are coughing). Also, if your dog is recovering

from a respiratory infection you should keep him away from other dogs for a week or more after resolution of signs. You may want to check the CDC website from time to time ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and search for canine influenza) for updated information.

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