Canine influenza in the Pittsburgh Area

Recent media attention to canine influenza has alarmed dog owners. The University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine has assembled the following quick facts to address the concerns of area dog owners.

Dog flu or Canine influenza is a relatively new influenza strain which was reported for the first time in January 2004 at a Florida greyhound track. The virus was first identified in the pet population in the spring of 2005 when the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine isolated and identified a strain of the influenza virus as a cause of a respiratory illness in dogs in shelters, humane societies, boarding facilities, and veterinary hospitals in that state. As of October 7, 2005, 2:00 p.m. (Eastern), confirmed cases of canine influenza had been diagnosed in the pet populations in ten states: Florida, New York, California, Oregon, Washington, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. It had also been diagnosed in Washington, D.C. This particular virus, belonging to the influenza A family, is a mutated strain of an equine influenza virus that has been detected in horses for over 40 years. Dog flu is a new, contagious respiratory disease that may mirror signs of kennel cough, including sneezing, coughing, and fever. It requires veterinary medical attention. Nearly 100 percent of dogs that come in contact with the virus become infected, regardless of age or vaccination history. Of those infected, 20 percent show no signs of disease. Researchers have observed canine influenza to be fatal in fewer than 8 percent of infected patients. This specific strain of influenza is not known to infect humans or poultry or cats.

Symptoms
In case of mild infection, the symptoms include low-grade fever, nasal discharge, and a persistent cough that could last up to three weeks. If the infection is severe, then it could result in symptoms like high fever, increased respiratory rates with difficulty breathing, and other indications of pneumonia. Because this virus is new to dogs, most dogs will not have a natural immunity to the influenza.

Transmission
Dog flu is thought to be a mainly airborne virus, most likely transmitted by an infected dog sneezing or coughing on another, although it can also be spread through direct contact with a contaminated surface. Symptoms of the flu generally appear two to five days after a dog is exposed to the virus, and infected dogs have the ability to spread the virus for seven to ten days from the onset of symptoms. Infected dogs may not exhibit signs of infection but are still able to spread the virus. Researchers are working on a vaccine to prevent dog influenza, but one does not yet exist at this time.

Treatment
Contact your veterinarian if you believe your dog may have contracted canine influenza. Your veterinarian is best qualified and equipped to make a diagnosis and to provide advice for caring for any symptom-free dogs you may have in your household. Although most dogs will recover from this virus without any treatment, dogs exhibiting symptoms of a mild infection can be treated with antibiotics to prevent secondary bacterial infections. Others with a more severe form of the virus require the same treatment as humans with influenza: fluids and rest, and more severe cases requiring intravenous fluids and antibiotics. Treatment for this population has been successful in about 95 percent of the cases.
Prevention
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As with any other potentially communicable disease, exercising a few common-sense precautions can help to prevent the spread of canine influenza:

- Use kennels, grooming facilities, and dog parks that are well known to you.
- Watch for news of canine influenza outbreaks in your area.
- Contact facilities in advance to ask about any recent occurrences of respiratory illnesses in dogs.
- Inquire about steps pet facility operators take to isolate any apparent cases of illness.
- If your pet is exhibiting symptoms of canine influenza, contact your local veterinarian. Your veterinarian is best qualified and equipped to make a diagnosis.
- If your pet has a respiratory infection or has recently recovered from one, limit its contact with other dogs for a couple of weeks, allowing for complete recovery and reducing the likelihood of transmission.
- Assume that the more exposure your dog has to other dogs, the greater the chance of becoming infected.

The Bottom Line
“The important thing is that people not panic over this. Canine flu is a new disease, so there is a lot we don’t know about it, but the mortality rate is very low, and many dogs don’t even get sick from it. It made a huge splash in the press because the molecular genetics part of the story established such a clear cross-species transmission of an influenza virus – not because it is a new, deadly disease of dogs. The virulence of this virus has been greatly exaggerated by some.” - Dr. Tom Graves, University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine