The Flu?

CANINE INFLUENZA VIRUS

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We have all heard of the flu virus but did you know that canines can get the flu too? The canine influenza virus, also known as H3N8, is a highly contagious viral infection that is similar to human influenza, but is caused by a different strain of the virus. The H3N8 strain is primarily found in horses, but has mutated so that canines are now susceptible to this infection. The first documented case of canine influenza was in 2004 in a Florida Greyhound kennel. Canine influenza is considered endemic in only a handful of states including Florida, Colorado, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. Texas has not had a large outbreak of the virus, but there have been a few documented cases.

Unfortunately, the canine influenza virus is easily transmitted between dogs. It is primarily spread through respiratory secretions such as coughing, sneezing or nasal discharge and can also survive for short periods of time on items such as water bowls and toys. The virus cannot survive long in an open environment, so it usually spreads when dogs come in direct contact with each other. Dogs that are housed in close quarters where infected items are potentially encountered are also susceptible. It is important to note that the canine influenza virus cannot be transmitted to cats or humans, and the current human influenza viruses cannot be transmitted to dogs.

Canine influenza is a disease that is similar to the human flu. If your dog is exposed, they are likely to contract the virus but symptoms can vary. It is important to note that not every dog will become sick from the virus. Most cases are mild and can include nasal discharge, fever, sneezing and coughing. Mild symptoms affect about 80 percent of canines that contract the virus. These symptoms may require symptomatic treatment but typically resolve themselves within several days to two weeks. A small

portion of dogs may develop more severe symptoms such as prolonged fever, lethargy, respiratory difficulty and pneumonia. In most of these cases, the viral infection has become complicated by a secondary bacterial infection. This can lead to a more severe clinical illness or even become life threatening. Severe cases are usually treated aggressively with fluids, antibiotics, and sometimes oxygen therapy. Any canines showing mild or severe symptoms of the virus should be isolated from other pets.

Canine influenza is different from the human flu in that it is not seasonal. Instead, it presents a year-round problem. Each year humans can acquire different strains of the flu, and the severity of the cases vary depending on the year and location of the outbreaks. The human flu is seen primarily in the fall and winter months when everyone is in close quarters due to the cooler temperatures. Often dogs are kept in close proximity year round, making them susceptible to the virus at any time. To help protect against canine influenza, veterinarians may administer a flu vaccination. The vaccination is not considered part of the annual core vaccine regimen; however, it is usually given to dogs that have greater potential to be exposed to the canine influenza virus. Canines that may have a greater risk for exposure include pets that frequently spend time around other dogs or those that board regularly. The canine influenza vaccine is a well-tolerated vaccine that has shown to be effective. Just like the human flu vaccine, the canine influenza vaccine does not necessarily prevent the disease, but it can help decrease its severity and reduce the risk of transmitting the virus to others.

Understanding how canines are exposed to the virus may help reduce the chance of infection. Consult with your family veterinarian to determine if your dog is a suitable candidate to receive the canine flu vaccine.