



LEPTOSPIROSIS AND YOUR DOG

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As water levels rise across the Bay Area during the winter, so does the number of documented canine leptospirosis cases. This leads to a series of articles, TV segments and worried owners calling veterinarians to ensure their dog has the “lepto vaccine.”

It is essential that, as a dog owner, you know the facts, risks and warning signs of leptospirosis to minimize the likelihood of your dog contracting the disease. Leptospirosis is a bacteria residing in latent water such as lakes, puddles, and streams. Any mammal can be infected (including humans), interestingly, cats seem to have some inherent immunity.

Leptospirosis thrives in moist environments. It is most prevalent in the northeastern region of the country. However, there has been a surge of recent cases in and around San Francisco. Once infected, the bacteria travel through the bloodstream to the kidneys, liver and other parts of the body.

Not all dogs exposed to leptospirosis will develop clinical signs of disease. The extent to which the bacteria affect vital organ function depends on the infected dog’s immune status and ability to produce antibodies against the bacteria. Immuno-compromised animals are at greatest risk for severe disease from exposure to the bacteria.

A vaccination against leptospirosis is available. It is recommended for any animal that may have exposure to the bacteria. The vaccine is boosted once yearly. It is important to note that vaccination does not guarantee disease prevention.



There are many strains of leptospirosis, and the vaccine only protects against certain strains. Discuss with your veterinarian whether vaccination is appropriate for your dog based on your geographic location and dog's lifestyle.

The most life-threatening effects of leptospirosis are acute liver and kidney failure. Clinical signs of leptospirosis include fever, malaise, dehydration, increased thirst and urination or lack of urination, bloody urine, inappetence, vomiting, diarrhea, and yellow skin or sclera. If you note any of the aforementioned symptoms your dog should be seen by a veterinarian immediately.

The disease is highly contagious and zoonotic. If leptospirosis is suspected barrier precautions will be taken by your veterinarian and staff to avoid transmission to other animals or humans. Diagnostic tests will likely include bloodwork to assess liver and kidney values as well as leptospirosis titers. These titers may be repeated. If leptospirosis is suspected intravenous fluid and antibiotic therapy will often be instituted before titers return. Your pet will likely be hospitalized for three days or longer, depending on the severity of illness.

If you suspect your dog has contracted leptospirosis, early intervention is imperative and can be curative. As always be sure to download the [DogTrekker mobile app](#) where you'll find the closest 24-hour emergency pet hospital and other resources regarding prevalent canine diseases.