

I heard that some dogs in Maryland have the dog flu and 2 have died. What is the dog flu? Can it be prevented? Is it something my cat can catch?

Those are all good questions. Canine Influenza (the dog flu) is a highly contagious virus that was first seen in Greyhounds after it mutated from the equine flu virus and jumped from the horse population in Florida to dogs. Recently the flu virus has been confirmed in 6 dogs in Maryland and unfortunately 2 of those dogs have died.

The virus has not been shown to mutate and affect cats. People cannot contract the flu from their dogs but they can spread the virus from one dog to another by fomites. Fomites are vehicles that allow a virus to be transmitted including contaminated clothing, water bowls, and toys. The most common way a dog becomes infected with the virus is from being around other dogs that have it. Most of our cases are seen after close contact at doggie daycare, boarding facilities and the dog parks. There is a vaccine available that will help lessen the severity of the flu but it is not 100% effective at preventing infection. More doggie daycare centers and boarding facilities are requiring the flu vaccine be given prior to admission. The first time the vaccine is given, a booster must be administered 3 weeks later. After that, the vaccine is given every 12 months.

The incubation period is typically two to five days after exposure before clinical signs appear. Infected dogs may shed the virus for seven to ten days from the start of clinical signs. Once a dog is infected with the virus, the most common signs include an ongoing cough and nasal discharge. It is commonly mistaken for an infection due to “kennel cough”. The cough persists for 10 to 21 days despite therapy with antibiotics or cough suppressants. In some severe cases we will see fever and difficulty breathing. While we usually base our diagnosis on clinical signs, confirmatory tests include a nasal swab or blood test that is submitted to a lab. As with the human flu virus, our biggest concern when a dog contracts the flu is that secondary bacterial infections will form in the lungs and cause a serious pneumonia. The flu doesn't discriminate; all breeds and ages of dogs are susceptible. The fatality rate is low, generally 1% to 5%.

You should talk to your dog's veterinarian about whether or not to have your dog vaccinated. The decision to vaccinate is based on exposure and risk of contracting the virus from other dogs.

Marianne E. Bailey, DVM  
South Arundel Veterinary Hospital