

Infectious tracheobronchitis (ITB), more commonly known as “kennel cough,” is a highly contagious respiratory disease of both unvaccinated and occasionally vaccinated dogs. ITB produces a harsh, hacking, and even “honking” cough that will persist for weeks if left untreated and might progress into a more serious bronchopneumonia. Some sick dogs will have discharge from the nose and may gag, wretch, and spit up phlegm.

Often, the cause of ITB is mistakenly attributed to only one bacterium, Bordetella, but actually there are two other bacteria as well as eight different viruses that contribute to the kennel cough complex. This is why an occasional dog that has been vaccinated with the Bordetella (kennel cough) vaccine will still break with ITB. The Bordetella vaccine can be thought of as being similar in some ways to the flu vaccine. Vaccination lessens the risk of becoming sick and lessens the severity of symptoms in those who become sick. That being said, the Bordetella bacterium is still implicated as a primary cause or secondary invader in most cases of kennel cough. Therefore, medical treatment is generally aimed at this particular bacterium, as the viral component of the illness is usually self-limiting.

Conventional veterinary therapy commonly includes an appropriate antibiotic for eliminating the Bordetella bacterium, in addition to strong cough suppressants to quiet the tracheobronchitis and allow healing to take place. It is recommended that antibiotic therapy continue for 14-21 days, though patients are generally feeling much better in 5-7 days. Treatment at Plano Animal Clinic also includes a combination of an injectable antibiotic and steroid placed directly into the trachea. We have found the intratracheal injection to significantly shorten the symptomatic phase of the illness.

While the large majority of dogs suffering with ITB respond to conventional therapy, those not responding may have contracted a much more serious illness. This is especially true of puppies and young dogs coming out of close confinement operations, such as shelters and humane organizations. Early distemper looks just like kennel cough, and both are spread easily through the air. Unfortunately, antibiotic therapy directed toward the bacteria that cause kennel cough has no effect on the virus that causes distemper. Delaying antiviral therapy for three or four weeks, while a puppy is treated with a string of antibiotics for a “stubborn case” of kennel cough, may prove fatal if the real cause of illness is distemper virus.

The dilemma the owner of such a puppy faces is this. The veterinary community at large believes distemper to be incurable, and so an attending veterinarian is unable to offer any real hope to the owner of a puppy believed to be suffering from distemper. The recommendation for

such a puppy is often euthanasia. However, at Plano Animal Clinic, we have used alternative treatment protocols, developed on site by Dr. Ward (as detailed on this website), to treat a variety of canine and feline viral diseases. If we can stop the virus from replicating and strengthen the immune system, many of these patients can still recover, but there is only a narrow window of opportunity.

In our experience, a fully or even partially vaccinated dog with a hacking cough, a low-grade fever (if any), and little or no nasal or ocular discharge, probably has kennel cough and is likely to respond to conventional medical (antibiotic) therapy. However, an incompletely vaccinated young dog with a persistent cough despite antibiotic therapy, a fever of 103° F. or higher, and a discharge from the eyes or nose, probably has distemper and needs additional help. Of course, symptoms of individual patients may vary.

The bottom line is this. Kennel cough cases almost always clear with conventional antibiotic therapy. Distemper cases will not. Sick puppies with unrelenting coughs after 7-10 days of appropriate antibiotic therapy should, in our opinion, be given additional antiviral therapy and immune system support. To do otherwise is to base the puppy's future on the hope that distemper virus is not involved in the illness. Even the strongest antibiotics will not kill a virus. You, the owner, will have to seek out this alternative care, as most veterinarians are unaware of its existence.

At Plano Animal Clinic, we've had a lot of experience in treating these difficult cases. The good news is that the same combination of antiviral, antibacterial, and immune stimulating therapies we use for treating distemper cases works even better for these similarly appearing cases of resistant ITB/kennel cough. Call for an appointment if you would like us to evaluate your sick puppy.

*NOTE: State law prohibits us from consulting with the owner of any sick pet that we have not personally examined. Your understanding in this matter is appreciated. As with any conventional or alternative medical therapy, there is no stated or implied guarantee of success.*