

# Kennel Cough: Signs and Symptoms

## Dr. Ruth MacPete, DVM

Ruth has more than 15 years of experience in the veterinary industry as a companion animal board-certified veterinarian in private practice as well as a founding member of IDEXX's Pet Health Network team.

For more from [Dr. Ruth MacPete](#), find her on [Facebook](#) or at [www.drruthpetvet.com](http://www.drruthpetvet.com)!

**Infectious tracheobronchitis**, commonly known as kennel cough, is a canine respiratory infection caused by *Bordetella bronchiseptica* and canine parainfluenza virus. These pathogens attack the cilia lining the respiratory tract and cause inflammation of the upper airway. This leads to irritation of the airways and a dry cough. It also makes the animal more susceptible to a secondary infection. Although kennel cough is more common during summer, it can occur anytime.

### How does your dog get it?

Kennel cough is VERY contagious. It is named kennel cough because it can quickly spread through a kennel and infect every dog. Kennel cough can be transmitted by aerosols released when a sick animal coughs, by direct contact with an infected animal, or by the sharing of contaminated objects. Kennel cough spreads rapidly when dogs are kept in close quarters (such as boarding facilities and animal shelters), but it can also spread if a dog greets an infected dog during a walk or drinks from a contaminated water bowl at the dog park.

### Signs and symptoms

Any dog can get kennel cough, but puppies and unvaccinated dogs are at a greater risk. Kennel cough causes a persistent, nonproductive cough that may sound as if something is caught in your pet's throat and they are gagging or trying to clear their throat. Others describe it as a deep honking cough. Symptoms usually develop three to ten days after exposure to an infected animal. Animals with kennel cough will otherwise act and eat normally. Exercise or getting excited can make symptoms worse.

### Diagnosis

If you think your dog has kennel cough, see your veterinarian as soon as possible. Because there's no specific test for kennel cough, it's a diagnosis of

exclusion. Your veterinarian will examine your dog to exclude other causes of a nonproductive cough, such as heart disease, fungal and parasitic infections like heartworm disease, a collapsing trachea, and cancer. Dogs with kennel cough usually have a history of exposure, i.e. newly acquired pets from a shelter, pet store, or breeder, or pets that have recently been boarded, to a groomer, recent boarding, training classes, dog shows, or outings to dog parks. Based on the examination and history, your veterinarian will determine whether they suspect kennel cough.

### Treatment

Treatment depends on the severity of symptoms. In very mild cases, no medications are given since the disease is self-limiting and will run its course, much like a human cold. Humidifiers and using a harness instead of a collar (to avoid irritating the neck) can also help. More serious cases are treated with oral antibiotics and often cough suppressants. Most cases resolve within 7-14 days. If symptoms don't improve, pets should be re-examined and further work-up may be necessary. Kennel cough can occasionally progress to pneumonia so it is important to monitor your pet and notify your veterinarian if he or she isn't improving. Puppies with an immature immune system and older dogs with a weaker immune systems are at greater risk for developing pneumonia from kennel cough. If your dog becomes listless, lethargic, stops eating, has trouble breathing, develops excessive green nasal discharge or a productive cough, see your veterinarian immediately. Finally, if you suspect your dog has kennel cough, isolate them from other dogs to avoid spreading it.

### Prevention

There are three types of vaccines available against kennel cough: an injectable, intranasal, and newer oral form. Although these vaccines don't provide 100% protection, they provide some protection against kennel cough and decrease the severity of symptoms. Speak with your veterinarian to learn more about kennel cough and the best way to protect your dog from it.

*If you have any questions or concerns, you should always visit or call your veterinarian - they are your best resource to ensure the health and well-being of your pets.*