

As many of you may be aware, there is a strain of canine influenza virus that has made it to our region and is infecting our canine companions.

Historically, canine influenza has been caused by two influenza strains. The first was reported in the United States beginning in 2004 and was labeled H3NA influenza A virus. In 2015 an outbreak of canine influenza started in Chicago and was determined to be caused by a separate virus labeled H3N2. This strain is virtually identical to an H3N2 strain previously reported only in Asia, specifically Korea, China and Thailand. It is suspected that this virus strain mutated from an avian influenza virus to become infective to canines. Since March of 2015, many thousands of dogs have been confirmed infected with canine influenza H3N2 across the US.

The most recent reports show the virus throughout California; although to my knowledge, there has yet to be confirmed cases in Modesto. That said, it is only a matter of a short period of time until we have the virus in our canine companions here in our town. It is important to note that virtually all dogs exposed to the virus become infected as natural immunity has not yet occurred in dogs.

Dogs infected with the influenza virus most commonly will display relatively mild symptoms centered around the respiratory tract. They can have a soft moist cough lasting up to a month as well as sneezing, eye discharge, lethargy, decreased appetite and a fever. These symptoms can be compounded by a secondary bacterial infection that can occur with influenza infection. A more severe form can occur that results in very high fevers (104 F to 106 F) and pneumonia, causing increased respiratory effort and increased breathing rate. Again, secondary bacterial infection can occur in the lungs compounding the pneumonia. In extreme cases, canine patients can die from complications of infection with this virus. Incidentally, cats appear to be able to become infected with this virus from contacting infected dogs. They, too, will show respiratory symptoms.

Fortunately, there is an effective vaccination for the prevention of infection with H3N2 influenza virus in our canine companions. It is given in two doses three weeks apart and it is important to note that the first vaccination in the series is not protective. Whether or not your dog should be vaccinated against this virus is a matter of potential risk of infection. If your dog frequently contacts other dogs, be it at communal dog parks, the grooming parlor or the boarding kennel, I recommend vaccination. Of course each individual dog's lifestyle is different and a discussion should be had with your veterinarian as to whether or not it would be beneficial for your companion to be vaccinated against H3N2 influenza. I tend to be on the side of "better safe than sorry" as it is much better to prevent this disease than to have to bring your companion through a course of the disease.