

How to protect your dog from kennel cough

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If you have a pet—specifically a dog—then you have probably heard about kennel cough, an infection caused by bacteria or viruses that causes respiratory irritation and a deep, painful-sounding cough. In recent months, kennel cough cases have spiked nationally, forcing kennels to close for sanitation and veterinary visits to surge.

Stephan Carey, associate chairperson in the Department of Small Animal Clinical Sciences at Michigan State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, answers questions about the warning signs of [kennel cough](#) and explaining how its outbreak is connected to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What exactly is kennel cough?

Canine Infectious Respiratory Disease, known as CIRDC or "kennel [cough](#)," is a complex of highly contagious bacteria and viruses that cause transmissible upper respiratory tract disease among dogs in group settings. As the name suggests, it can happen in kennels, boarding facilities, doggie day care centers and animal shelters, but it can really occur anywhere dogs are commingling, including veterinary clinics, dog parks and dog shows.

It is common to see mild increases in the numbers of outbreaks during the summer months every year because of increases in travel—so, increased kenneling for pets—and increased [social activity](#) among dogs at dog parks.

COVID-19 has affected all walks of life—for humans and animals alike. How has it played a part in increased kennel cough cases?

In 2020, because of the COVID-related shelter-in-place and social distancing restrictions, we saw a marked decrease in the numbers of outbreaks of CIRDC. This is very similar to what happened to the 2019-2020 flu season in people. Normally the influenza season in the U.S. runs from late September through April. In 2020, the [flu season](#) was cut short by about one month because of the implementation of COVID restrictions (social distancing, hand hygiene, decreased travel) in early

March. We saw the same effect on CIRDC/kennel cough cases in the summer of 2020.

This year, we have seen a notable increase in CIRDC outbreaks, particularly during the latter part of the summer. While we would expect a mild increase in most summer seasons, it's particularly notable this year nationally. There have been large outbreaks reported in New York, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, California, Missouri and Minnesota, and this is happening in other parts of the U.S. and in the UK as well.

The biggest contributor to this uptick is likely the increased commingling of dogs because people are going back to work and enrolling dogs in day care settings, because people are traveling and boarding their dogs in kennels, and because of increased social activities like frequenting dog parks. All of these are likely the result of the easing of COVID restrictions.

Another COVID-related factor is that many dogs likely had lapses in CIRDC vaccinations during 2020-2021, as access to veterinary care was heavily impacted by COVID. Many of the CIRDC vaccines need to be given annually to provide optimal protection and missing a year could increase the risk of transmission.

How can pet owners keep dogs safe?

Like humans preventing the spread of COVID, vaccinations are among the most important things we can do to keep pets safe. While there aren't vaccines for all factors causing kennel cough, there are vaccines for the most common, like Bordetella and Canine Influenza Virus—similar to the flu shot for humans. So, being sure that your pet's vaccines are up-to-date, especially if you're in situations where they're going to be around other dogs, is the best thing to do.

What should pet owners do if their pets show signs of kennel cough?

The most common symptoms of kennel cough are deep coughs that sound as if something were stuck in their throats. Other symptoms include sneezing, running nose, eye discharge, lethargy, loss of appetite and sometimes fever.

If your dog is exhibiting any symptoms of kennel cough, contact your veterinarian immediately and keep them away from other dogs. Your veterinarian can determine whether a veterinary visit is recommended. In many cases, dogs have self-limiting infections, and the recommendation may be to simply isolate the pet rather than to make a visit to the veterinarian, which could potentially increase the risk of transmission.

In dogs with more severe signs or risk factors for complicated infections—such as puppies, dogs with chronic respiratory disease or immunocompromised dogs—veterinary care may be necessary. Your veterinarian can also advise you on the need for quarantine. If quarantine is advised, plan to keep your dog away from social environments, including day care and boarding, for at least 14 days after their symptoms have resolved. This is generally how long it takes for a dog to clear the infection and no longer be contagious to other [dogs](#).

Provided by Michigan State University

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