

Canine influenza: A Real and Present Danger?

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Fall is upon us. Here on the Hill, the biggest hallmarks of autumn include the beautiful colors in Lincoln and Stanton Parks and cooler temperatures. And flu season. Both regular and swine flu.

As if having two influenzas to deal with weren't enough, the news from neighboring Fairfax County has us all worried about yet a third flu: canine influenza. There were two confirmed cases in their animal shelter last month. So, how much worrying do we need to do?

We're all becoming virologists now as we learn the subtype nomenclatures thanks to swine flu (H1N1). Canine influenza virus is caused by the H3N8 virus. It's only been within the last few years that this virus has hit our radar; the first cases were discovered at a Florida greyhound racing track in 2004. The good news for us and our dogs is that it's not very common. Also good to know is that it can't be spread from dogs to people.

We consider canine influenza to be endemic now, meaning it's part of the permanent landscape. Recent reports of about a dozen or so exposures at the Fairfax shelter with those two confirmed cases mean it's here. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), more than 1,000 cases have been confirmed to date across the country.

Like most flus, canine influenza is spread by coughing and sneezing, spreading tiny droplets onto food bowls and water dishes, leashes and collars, and of course, other dogs. The virus can hang on, too, surviving up to 48 hours outside of a host. After a couple of days, exposed dogs may start having clinical signs and can be very contagious to each other.

Canine influenza targets the entire respiratory tract—from the nose to the lungs. Fortunately, most dogs only develop mild signs, like sneezing and runny nose, low-grade fever and maybe a mild cough, much like kennel cough. And like kennel cough, the coughing can last a few weeks. And it's a wet cough (unlike kennel cough's dry, honking cough). Some dogs, however, can develop a deeper cough, bronchitis and even full-blown pneumonia.

More severely affected dogs, however, can run high fevers and even have trouble breathing. The disease is diagnosed by testing for antibodies to the virus. And we can't



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