

Something is making dogs very, very sick

By MIKE SCANLON

It's a nightmare fit for Edgar Allan Poe — a mutant strain of virus sweeps a hapless population.

The virus is highly contagious, the population nearly completely lacking in natural immunity, and the disease afflicts population members across the globe.

The symptoms include vastly reduced white blood cell counts, convulsions, vomiting, diarrhea, dehydration and heavy internal bleeding. Death often results within hours of the first clear symptoms of illness.

It's the kind of scene you usually forget long before the movie theater popcorn forgets you.

But this summer in southeast Michigan it just may be real — because nightmare or not, something is making a lot of dogs around here very, very sick.

SOME ANIMAL health professionals believe the cause may be as simple as this summer's muggy, wet weather prompting an unusually high rate of bacterial digestive tract infections in dogs.

But other veterinarians, apparently the majority, believe it could be exactly the kind of thing of which Poe might have dreamed — a mutant virus.

Veterinarians who believe the disease is parvovirus say the summer weather-bacteria theory has two flaws. First, reports of similar-symptoms locally seem to have started in February. Secondly, the vets say bacteria infections can usually be counted on to boost white blood cell counts, not decrease them drastically as the mystery disease has done.

But even veterinarians who disagree on what's causing the outbreak agree on its severity — "all of a sudden the blood comes just pouring out of the bowels," said Dr. Elwood Collins.

"I'm almost positive it is (parvovirus)," said Dr. Richard D'Adamo. "I don't know how else to explain it this summer. I've had five years experience in this area, and I've never had a summer to match the number of intestinal-related cases I've had this year."

"The problem is, to definitely diagnose parvovirus you have to find the virus."

Not much is known about parvovirus, largely because it apparently never affected a dog anywhere in the world before the spring of 1978. It has since been reported in Australia, Europe and throughout the U.S. Research scientists last year at the Cornell Research Laboratory For Diseases of Dogs concluded that canine parvovirus may be a new, mutant strain similar to viruses long known to non-fatally afflict mink and cats.

The disease has an incubation period of four to 18 days. Puppies are its hardest-hit victims.

PARVOVIRUSES develop only the nucleus of dividing cells, and as a result parvoviruses often infect parts of the body which consist of these cells. In dogs, that means epithelial cells in the intestine.

The parvovirus causes enteritis, or "ulcerates a certain part of the intestines. As (the dogs) lose fluids, it's like a straw-sucking effect. The body says, hey, we need more fluids here. Before you know it, the dog's got a severe electrolyte loss and fluid loss," said Dr. D'Adamo.

"It's not an easy thing to find," said Dr. D'Adamo. "The early phases are very disgusting. You can just have a lackadaisical dog from heat, or it could be from something else. By the time you see the blood (from vomiting or diarrhea), it's too late."

Treatment is costly. Dr. Collins first attempts to arrest the diarrhea caused by the disease, then administers antibiotics to fight off secondary infections possibly caused by the reduced white blood count. Water and glucose are administered intravenously to restore lost fluids. Vitamins are also administered. Cheaper is a killed-virus vaccine available from local veterinarians, but which provides only short-term immunity. Injection costs are \$12-\$15. A live-virus vaccine that should protect dogs longer is promised for later this year.



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