

7 Natural Remedies for Healing Kennel Cough

Kennel cough, or Bordetella, is a common, very contagious upper respiratory infection in dogs. If your dog has a nagging, honking cough, and has been around a number of other dogs, it's time to take action. Instead of antibiotics, help speed your pup's recovery with these time-tested remedies.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Kennel cough, or bordetella, is a common, very contagious upper respiratory infection in dogs
- Most dogs acquire kennel cough in facilities where lots of dogs are housed in close quarters, for example, animal shelters and boarding kennels
- The most common symptom of a bordetella infection is a dry hacking cough
- It's best to let otherwise healthy dogs with kennel cough recover naturally with the aid of nontoxic remedies
- It's also best to avoid bordetella vaccines; instead, focus on supporting your dog's immune system

Kennel cough (scientific name: infectious tracheobronchitis), is a very common upper respiratory infection in dogs. If your furry family member has a persistent cough or is making choking sounds, she may have kennel cough, especially if she has recently spent time at an animal shelter, boarding facility, or another setting in which she was exposed to a lot of other dogs.

Kennel cough in dogs is a form of bronchitis and is similar to a chest cold in humans. It has a number of different causes, the most common of which is the Bordetella bronchiseptica bacteria. Many people think bordetella bacteria alone causes kennel cough, but that's technically inaccurate, since dogs who acquire bordetella bacteria usually also have a virus, such as adenovirus, distemper, herpes, or parainfluenza that makes them more vulnerable to infection.

How Dogs Contract Kennel Cough

Kennel cough is highly contagious, and dogs can remain infectious for 6 to 14 weeks after symptoms resolve. Dog-to-dog exposure occurs when an infected dog coughs or sneezes and a healthy dog inhales the aerosolized respiratory secretions.

The canine respiratory tract is coated in a protective lining of mucus. If this lining is compromised, an infection can take hold from the inhaled particles. The result is inflammation of the larynx and trachea. It's the inflammation that causes the coughing.

If the healthy dog's respiratory tract is compromised by stressors such as travel, being housed in a crowded environment, cold temperatures, environmental pollutants, or infectious viruses, then Bordetella bronchiseptica, which is the chief infectious bacterial agent in kennel cough, can invade the respiratory tract.

Bordetella bacteria are usually accompanied by at least one other infectious agent, typically a virus. Kennel cough is actually multiple infections occurring at the same time and not just a single infection. This is one of the reasons the Bordetella vaccine is often not effective.

Most cases of kennel cough occur in dogs with suppressed immune systems who spend time in crowded quarters with inadequate ventilation and lots of warm air. Examples are boarding facilities, grooming shops, and animal shelters.

Symptoms of a Kennel Cough Infection

The universal symptom of a bordetella infection is a persistent, hard, honking cough. A sudden dry hacking cough, sneezing, snorting, retching, gagging, or vomiting in response to very light pressure to the trachea, or a spasmodic cough when a dog is excited or exercising, are common symptoms of kennel cough. If your healthy dog suddenly develops spasmodic coughing, you should suspect kennel cough.

Your dog may also cough up foamy white phlegm or have nasal or eye secretions. Occasionally, there will be other signs of illness such as a runny nose, sneezing, depression, or a mild fever.

Symptoms of infection usually appear 2 to 14 days after exposure in mild cases of kennel cough, typically last between 10 and 20 days, and can recur during periods of stress. In mild cases, dogs usually continue to eat and remain alert. When the condition is more serious, there can be lethargy, loss of appetite, and in a worst-case scenario, the infection can progress to life-threatening pneumonia.

Severe cases of kennel cough primarily occur in immunocompromised dogs or in very young puppies. It's rare to lose a dog with a competent immune system to kennel cough.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Diagnosis of kennel cough includes taking a history of the symptoms the dog is experiencing, as well as any history of time spent at a boarding kennel, puppy mill, shelter, or other facility where lots of dogs are housed.

Bacterial cultures, viral isolations and bloodwork may be performed to identify the specific pathogens causing the infection. Sometimes x-rays are taken to check for pneumonia or bronchitis.

Most cases of kennel cough resolve on their own without medical intervention, so I don't automatically recommend that you hurry to the veterinarian, especially for unnecessary antibiotics, because antibiotics don't address the viral component of this infection. I always prefer to let the dog's body heal itself naturally.

During the acute phase of the illness, I strongly recommend using a harness to prevent your dog's collar from aggravating the situation, especially if she tends to pull against her leash on walks. You can also try humidifying the air to help reduce or alleviate coughing spells. I like to add a few drops of pure lavender oil to the water to help soothe the throat.

Complete recovery from kennel cough can take up to 3 weeks in healthy dogs, and twice as long in older patients or those with underlying immunosuppressive conditions. Puppies can also take a bit longer to recover because their immune systems are not yet fully developed.

Since a serious episode of kennel cough can result in pneumonia, if your dog doesn't start to improve on her own within about a week, the coughing becomes progressively worse, she develops a fever or stops eating, it's very important to make an appointment with your veterinarian.

I also recommend seeing your vet if you have a puppy with symptoms that go beyond the typical symptoms of kennel cough, such as a change in breathing patterns, difficulty breathing, loss of appetite, or a markedly diminished energy level.

Natural Remedies for Kennel Cough

There are several wonderful natural remedies I've used for years to speed dogs' recovery from kennel cough and reduce the severity of symptoms.

- Esberitox is a fast-acting echinacea that can be very effective in reducing the virulence of bordetella infections
- Manuka honey
- Raw garlic and olive leaf are natural antibacterial and antiviral agents
- Slippery elm can help soothe sore, irritated throats, as well as Throat Coat tea
- Vitamin C is an antiviral and vitamin E provides immune system support
- Essential oils can be used to help a dog with kennel cough breathe easier. Oils of eucalyptus, lavender and tea tree have antibacterial and antiviral properties. These oils should always be water diffused. Diffuse oils in one room, allowing your dog to leave the room, if desired. **Note: These essential oils are only for homes without cats!**
- Homeopathic kennel cough nosodes can be beneficial at reducing the severity and duration of illness, but since they require a prescription, you'll need to work with an integrative veterinarian, click [here](#) to find one that does telemedicine

Bordetella Vaccine

Many conventional veterinarians recommend bordetella vaccines every six months, however, I do not. Veterinary immunology authority Dr. Ronald Schultz has stated that bordetella is an "un-vaccinatable" disease. The infection is caused by a wide variety of bacterial and viral agents, and no single vaccine can provide protection from them all, nor will the vaccine treat an active infection.

Many boarding kennels, doggy daycare facilities, groomers and other similar businesses require that dogs be vaccinated for kennel cough. The reason behind this requirement is to remove liability from those businesses.

When I must provide a bordetella vaccine for a dog who will be traveling or boarded, I always use the intranasal vaccine. It doesn't contain the strong adjuvants the injectable version has, and it carries few if any side effects. And remember, your dog can still acquire kennel cough infection even if she's been vaccinated.

The injectable bordetella vaccines are generally ineffective and will not prevent your dog from getting kennel cough. I do not recommend using the injectable kennel cough vaccines, so if your dog must receive this vaccination, request the nose drop option.

In addition, whatever protection the intranasal vaccine might offer wears off very quickly, usually in less than a year, which means your pet will need to be revaccinated every six months if you patronize businesses that demand the vaccine.

Thankfully, educated pet professionals, including many boarding facilities, groomers and doggy daycares now understand the incidence of kennel cough will not be minimized by mandatory vaccination and offer liability waivers as an alternative to proof of an ineffective bordetella vaccine.
