

What is Hemorrhagic Gastroenteritis (HGE)?

HGE refers to a set of symptoms in dogs that include sudden-onset bloody diarrhea and vomiting. Dogs with HGE may also have an elevated red blood cell count on blood tests and may be very tired or weak. Occasionally dogs with HGE develop blood clotting problems and kidney failure. These symptoms in dogs may be caused by viral infections, bacterial infections, ingested poisons, contaminated food, swallowed foreign objects, or parasitic infections. Usually the term “HGE” is used only when no obvious underlying cause can be found. In most cases, veterinarians treat individual cases HGE without knowing the specific cause. Any dog of any age can get HGE. Dogs between the ages of 2-4 years appear to get it more often. Typically, private veterinary clinics diagnose HGE infrequently. Outbreaks of HGE are unusual.

Local HGE Outbreaks. In the winters of 2004, 2005, and 2006, seasonal outbreaks of mild to moderately severe bloody diarrhea in dogs in LA County were reported to Veterinary Public Health (VPH). Because the cases occurred very close together in time and place, it was suspected that a contagious infection or food contamination was causing the illness. Extensive diagnostics were conducted each time, and did not reveal a clear cause.

On January 21, 2009, reports of fresh outbreaks of watery and bloody diarrhea in dogs were again received, primarily from veterinary clinics in the San Fernando Valley. Thus far, 53 official reports have been received with an estimated 120 or more cases being seen at 4 clinics since January 1st. Reporting veterinarians stated that this was a much higher number of HGE cases than they usually see. VPH would like to systematically gather more information about HGE cases in the county. Detailed information about the diet and lifestyle of dogs is sought as well as physical exam, testing, and treatment information. Because the background information on cases is very important, only dogs that have owners will be included in the investigation.

What tests are done on dogs with HGE?

If Parvovirus is considered a possibility, a rapid in-clinic test on feces may be done first to make sure that is not the problem. Fecal tests for parasites are often performed. Blood tests often show that the dog has a very high red blood cell count, and low protein levels as protein and fluid are lost into the gut. Sometimes additional tests such as fecal cultures are done, or radiographs of the abdomen are taken to check if the dog swallowed any unusual objects.

Can I catch HGE from my dog? HGE in dogs is not typically reported to be linked to human illness. However, since the actual cause of HGE is unknown, it is wise to wash hands routinely after handling your dog, your dog’s bedding and bowls, and after cleaning up after your dog. If you become ill, speak to your doctor and mention that your dog has the same symptoms.

How can I protect my dog from HGE?

The cause of the current outbreak is not known. However, you can protect your dog from many common viruses, parasites and infections that can cause HGE-like symptoms. Keep your dog up-to-date on all recommended vaccines and dewormings. Make sure you keep access to the brand name and lot number from your dog’s food and treats for reference in the event of a product recall. Do not feed food intended for humans to your dog. Pick up and discard your dog’s feces regularly, especially in your own yard, to prevent contamination of the soil.

