

When Splash Time Turns Risky

Letting your dog splash in puddles could hide a serious danger. Learn how to protect your dog from this life-threatening disease.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease found in stagnant water and soil contaminated by urine of wildlife, that threatens dogs' kidneys, liver, and lungs — and can even spread to people
- Dogs can be infected through cuts and exposure to contaminated soil, drinking contaminated water, or swimming in contaminated water. Risk exists in both rural and urban areas where rodents and wildlife thrive
- Symptoms range from fever, vomiting, and lethargy to severe organ damage, jaundice, or seizures. Because signs mimic other illnesses, early veterinary testing and treatment are essential
- Treatment involves antibiotics, hospitalization, IV fluids, and supportive care. Some owners also explore homeopathic remedies for symptom relief under holistic veterinary guidance
- Prevention includes avoiding stagnant water, controlling rodents, practicing good hygiene, and cleaning with gloves and disinfectants. Protecting your dog through vaccination can also help to safeguard your family's health

You have probably seen your dog leap into a lake, puddle, or stream with pure joy. Watching them splash and swim can be one of life's simple pleasures. But beneath that fun lurks an invisible risk — leptospirosis, a serious bacterial infection that affects dogs and can even spread to people.

Leptospirosis, often shortened to "lepto," is caused by spiral-shaped bacteria called *Leptospira*. These bacteria thrive in damp environments — especially warm, stagnant water, muddy soil, and areas contaminated by wildlife urine.^{1,2} That means the very puddle or pond where your dog happily plays could also be a breeding ground for this disease.

What Exactly Is Leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis^{3,4} is an infectious disease that can affect your dog's kidneys, liver, lungs, and even their nervous system. In severe cases, it can be life-threatening if not treated quickly.

The disease spreads through contact with infected urine. Wildlife such as rats, raccoons, skunks, and opossums are frequent carriers, but nearly any mammal can harbor the bacteria.⁵ Once urine contaminates soil, grass, or water, the bacteria can survive for weeks or even months in moist conditions.

Dogs become infected when the bacteria enter through broken skin (cuts or scrapes), mucous membranes of the mouth, nose, or even the eyes, or through ingestion. Drinking from a puddle, swimming in a stream, or simply walking through contaminated mud with a paw wound can all be risky.

For many years, leptospirosis was thought to be more of a rural problem — something dogs got from farms, swamps, or wooded trails. Today, it is showing up in urban areas too, because rats and rodents thrive in cities. In other words, no matter where you live, your dog may be at risk if they come into contact with contaminated water, soil, or wildlife.

The Warning Signs — What to Watch For

One of the challenges with leptospirosis is that its symptoms are highly variable. Some dogs may have only mild signs, while others develop severe illness that progresses quickly.

Early warning signs often mimic other conditions, so it is easy to miss the problem. That is why awareness is key. Common early signs include:^{6,7,8}

- Fever and shivering
- Loss of appetite
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Lethargy and reluctance to move
- Joint or muscle pain

As the disease progresses, it can cause organ damage. Symptoms may include:

- Increased drinking and urination (signs of kidney stress)
- Abdominal pain
- Petechiae (microbleeds or pinpoint bruises) in the skin
- Jaundice (yellowing of gums, skin, or eyes, signaling liver damage)
- Bloody urine, stool, or vomit
- Swelling in the legs or fluid in the chest/abdomen
- Difficulty breathing or coughing up blood

In some cases, dogs may collapse suddenly or suffer seizures due to advanced disease.

How Veterinarians Diagnose Leptospirosis

Because these signs overlap with many other illnesses, only a veterinarian can confirm leptospirosis through laboratory testing.

Diagnosing leptospirosis is not always straightforward. Veterinarians usually begin with a thorough exam, bloodwork, and urine testing. If leptospirosis is suspected, they may recommend specialized tests, such as:⁹

- **PCR test** — It detects bacterial DNA in blood or urine
- **MAT test (Microscopic Agglutination Test)** — This measures antibodies against leptospirosis, often done twice to confirm infection

- **Imaging or clotting tests** — These tests check for evidence of abnormal blood clotting and internal bleeding, particularly into the lungs

Because time is critical, veterinarians often start treatment right away if they strongly suspect leptospirosis — often before test results are back.

Fighting Back Against Leptospirosis

If your dog is diagnosed with leptospirosis, treatment needs to begin immediately. Conventional veterinary care includes:^{10,11}

- **Antibiotics** — Penicillin, ampicillin, doxycycline, and enrofloxacin are the most common choices. Ampicillin or Penicillin G are often the first line of treatment while test results are pending, but doxycycline or enrofloxacin will then be used to kill the bacteria and reduce the risk of your dog becoming a long-term carrier.¹²
- **Hospitalization** — Many dogs need IV fluids, inpatient care, and sometimes oxygen therapy to recover; in severe cases, dialysis may be necessary to support failing kidneys.
- **Supportive care** — Anti-nausea medicine, nutritional support, and pain relief help stabilize the dog.

Recovery can take weeks, and in severe cases, the disease may cause lasting kidney or liver damage. However, with early treatment, most dogs survive and thrive. Not every pet owner is comfortable with conventional medicine alone. Some look for natural or complementary approaches, such as homeopathy.

Homeopathic practitioners suggest that remedies (known as homeopathic medicines) may help control symptoms like vomiting, dehydration, and liver stress. Commonly mentioned homeopathic medicines include:¹³

- **Aconitum napellus** prevents shock in sudden cases
- **Arsenicum album** helps with digestive upset and dehydration
- **Crotalus horridus** helps with jaundice and bleeding
- **Lycopodium** is useful for chronic cases with appetite loss

Supporters argue that many dogs survive leptospirosis without complications, and that natural remedies can help with recovery. However, these approaches should be used under guidance from a homeopathic veterinarian as homeopathic medicine choice is very specific to each patient, and what is used for one patient may not be the correct prescription for the next.

Prevention — How You Can Protect Your Dog

Prevention is the best medicine when it comes to leptospirosis. While no strategy is 100% effective, you can dramatically reduce your dog's risk with these steps:

1. **Avoid risky water** — Do not let your dog drink or swim in stagnant water, puddles, or slow-moving streams, especially in warm weather.
2. **Control rodents** — Store pet food in sealed containers and discourage wildlife or rodents around your home.

3. **Practice hygiene** — Wash your hands after handling your dog, clean up urine with gloves, and disinfect areas your dog has soiled.
4. **Leash walks in risky areas** — Use a leash to prevent your dog from roaming where contaminated urine may be present.
5. **Vaccination** — There are canine vaccines available for several of the leptospirosis serovars. Talk to your veterinarian to see if vaccination is appropriate for your dog.¹⁴

Can You Catch Leptospirosis from Your Dog?

Yes. Leptospirosis is a zoonotic disease, meaning it can spread from animals to humans. In fact, it is considered one of the most common zoonotic infections worldwide.¹⁵

The bacteria can pass from an infected dog's urine to your skin if you have cuts, or through the mucous membranes around your eyes or in your nose or mouth. People who have been exposed may develop flu-like symptoms, and in severe cases, liver or kidney disease.

That is why cleaning up after a sick dog with gloves and disinfectant is so important. If you feel unwell after your dog is diagnosed, seek medical attention right away.

The Bottom Line — Awareness Saves Lives

Leptospirosis is one of those diseases that hides in plain sight. The puddle your dog splashes in, the stream they drink from, or the park where rodents roam could all expose them to this dangerous bacteria.

The good news? With awareness, prevention, and prompt veterinary care, leptospirosis is manageable. By staying alert to symptoms and acting fast if your dog seems unwell, you can give them the best chance at a full recovery. And by protecting your dog, you are also protecting yourself and your family.

Sources and References

^{1,5,6,10,15} [VCA Animal Hospitals, Leptospirosis in Dogs](#)

^{2,7,11} [Beyond Pets, What Is Leptospirosis in Dogs?](#)

³ [Veterinary Partner, Leptospirosis in Dogs](#)

⁴ [Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, Canine Leptospirosis](#)

^{8,9,13} [Dogs Naturally Magazine, November 6, 2021](#)

¹² [MSD Veterinary Manual, Treatment of Leptospirosis in Dogs](#)

¹⁴ [Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine, Volume 37, Issue 6, November/December 2023, Pages 1966-1982](#)
