



Contagious virus can be deadly particularly for young puppies

Keep Christmas canine away from other dogs.

**By Kathy Lu, The Roanoke Times
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Canine parvo usually strikes before a young pup has been fully vaccinated.

Like something in a science-fiction horror movie, the virus consumed the body of her tiny new puppy, forcing Becky Ray to watch helplessly as its life ebbed away.

Ray had the 2-pound, long-haired female Chihuahua for only five days before she was sick with “horrible diarrhea.” The 3-month old puppy spent the next five days of her life at Read Mountain Animal Hospital, where she died Oct. 14.

Her name was C.C.

“It was terrible,” Ray, 45, said in a recent telephone interview from her Roanoke County home. “I never want to go through this again.” Unfortunately, the virus that attacked C.C. is not a freak genetic mutation. It is the Canine Parvovirus (parvo for short) and one of the most common and severe gastrointestinal diseases among dogs.

“It is one of the biggest killers of puppies,” said Dr. David Bruce, the veterinarian who treated C.C.

And with puppies being such popular Christmas gifts, it is especially important to talk about parvo now, Bruce added.

The highly contagious virus kills by multiplying in the bone marrow, intestinal tract and immune system. It is usually spread when a dog comes into contact with the feces of an infected dog at places such as parks, kennels, shelters and pet stores.

The virus is most visible in the spring and fall when puppies – with naturally weak immune systems – are most abundant and likely to catch the disease, Bruce said. Adult dogs usually have milder symptoms and a better recovery rate.

Stricken puppies usually die of dehydration, Bruce said, the result of severe diarrhea and vomiting. For an inexplicable reason, he said, black and brown breeds such as Rottweilers and Dobermans are susceptible to the disease. Ray’s puppy was brown.

Since an infected animal needs to be quarantined and given fluids intravenously, treatment is costly, Bruce said. Ray said C.C.’s medical bills totaled almost \$800.

“That’s OK if it was going to save her,” Ray said.

The best way to avoid infection is to keep a puppy at home and away from other dogs until it has finished its vaccinations, Bruce said. The parvo vaccine is given as part of a dog's annual booster shot and puppies should be vaccinated at 6, 9 and 12 weeks of age, he added.

Bruce also recommends buying puppies from kennels rather than pet stores.

"There are good pet stores, but it's a more stressful environment," Bruce explained. "And not all breeders are good breeders. A good breeder is selective about who they're letting the puppy go to."

A good kennel also will have current vaccination papers for the puppy and its mother, Bruce added. Ray said when she told C.C.'s breeder what happened, the breeder immediately returned her money.

"She was very upset," Ray said. "She tried everything she could do to make this right."

Ray said she took C.C. out of her house twice, both times to work, where no other dogs had been. She and her husband, Danny, own Commonwealth Computer Services in Roanoke. C.C. was named after the business.

Ray now has to wait nine months for her house to decontaminate before she can buy another animal.

"You want to take time to pick out a good puppy. Don't get it because you feel sorry for it or because your 10-year-old wants it," Bruce said. "If you think a little bit in the beginning, it will pay off a lot in the end."

We were so attached to her," Ray said of her Chihuahua. "For a young child this would be awful."