Aspiration Pneumonia in Puppies

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Aspiration pneumonia is a frequently diagnosed lung disorder in young puppies, especially those that are orphaned. Orphaned puppies fed milk replacers by the tube method are most at risk because they are frequently overfed, or the tube is passed into the trachea rather than the esophagus. A malpositioned feeding tube will result in milk formula entering the lungs; this causes congestion and pneumonia. A puppy with a cleft palate may also aspirate milk or milk formulas into its lungs.

What are the symptoms?

A puppy that aspirates milk formula will usually have milk flow out the nostrils as well as have fluid entering the lungs. In severe instances, the puppy will have immediate difficulty in breathing.

What are the risks?

All cases of aspiration pneumonia are potentially very serious. Even puppies that only get 'a little' milk formula in their lungs frequently develop a bacterial lung infection within several days. They may recover or die depending on the severity.

What is the management?

If the aspiration is due to a congenital malformation such as cleft palate, then surgical intervention to repair the defect may be needed. Care should be taken if milk replacers are artificially fed so as not to get any into the puppy's trachea or lungs. The same is true when administering other medications such as liquid wormers, laxatives, or vitamins. If one suspects a puppy has aspirated a foreign substance, consult your veterinarian. The puppy must be observed closely for several days for signs of an infection such as respiratory distress, coughing and/or fevers. Antibiotics are given if bacteria invade the fluid-filled lung areas.

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