

Healthy Sled Dogs

Maintaining healthy sled dogs is priority.

Dr. Stuart Nelson, Jr. is the Chief Veterinarian for the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

Each year, volunteer veterinarians from all over the world become a part of the Iditarod Veterinarian Team.

To be chosen as a member of the team, the veterinarians must meet standards and criteria including being able to speak English, having experience with sled dogs, and having experience with small animal veterinarian medicine and surgery. The veterinarians also have to be in good health and able to withstand the working conditions of the arctic.

Veterinarians are involved in the prerace health screenings, too. More than 10, 000 examinations are given during the race by the team. The standards are high when it comes to dog care before, during, and after the Iditarod!

During the race, veterinarians are situated at the checkpoints. As dog teams arrive in each checkpoint, the musher provides the vet team with the 'vet book', a small notebook that contains information about the dogs on the team. Veterinarians examine the dogs quickly if the musher is leaving the checkpoint or more extensively if the musher is staying in a checkpoint. Veterinarians ask the musher questions about the dogs and make notations in the vet book to indicate information for the next checkpoint and veterinarians to read. Veterinarians must sign the 'vet book' before the musher leaves and the 'vet book' is part of the mandatory gear a musher carries.

When a decision is made for a dog to not continue in the race, the dog is called a 'dropped dog', meaning the dog is 'dropped' from the race. The dropped dog is left at the checkpoint and is under the direct care of the veterinarian team until it is flown out of the checkpoint.

The majority of 'dropped dogs' are pulled from the race due to minor issues such as but not limited to: the dog being in season and therefore, a distraction to other dogs on the team, sprained or strained wrists or limping, or minor ailments. The vast majority of symptoms are gone and unrecognizable within a few days.

The number of dogs dropped from the race is an indicator for the concern and priority of excellent dog care. Everyone wants healthy dogs before, during, and after the race.