

INTERVERTEBRAL DISK DISEASE/ BACK PAIN

Back pain, including that resulting from intervertebral disk disease, is fairly common in senior animals. Many times the injury can be related to trauma to the spinal cord, i.e. jumping from a high place or a fall. However, it may be very difficult to exactly pinpoint the cause. Pain may originate in two ways: 1) sprain or strain of the associated back muscles and ligaments or, 2) actual herniation (movement upward) of the soft tissue disk with subsequent pressure on the spinal cord.

SYMPTOMS

These types of injuries are most common in certain breeds, including dachshunds, cocker spaniels, basset hounds, lhasa apsos/shih tzus, beagles, and dobermans, but they can occur in ANY breed. Back injuries are more prone to occur in dogs with long spines and short legs, obese dogs, and middle-aged to older dogs, who often have some calcification of the spinal disks or spinal arthritis. Unfortunately, once a back injury occurs it may recur, as multiple disks may be involved.

Back injuries are quite painful and lead to non-specific signs of discomfort, including lethargy, non-localizing lameness, reluctance to jump, walk, run, or ascend stairs, and occasionally loss of appetite. Your pet may vocalize when picked up or when the spine is moved in certain directions. Rarely, symptoms may be so severe as to include paralysis, loss of feeling, or inability to walk; indicating a need for immediate surgical intervention to relieve pressure on the spinal cord.

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnostic tests may include a comprehensive physical and neurological exam, x-rays of the spine, blood testing, cerebral spinal fluid analysis, and possibly sedation for a myelogram or MRI.

TREATMENT

Treatment of less severe back injuries is as follows:

- 1) STRICT REST must be enforced at home for the specified length of time. Generally three weeks of rest are required to allow healing and strengthening of damaged collagen fibers in the area. This means NO running, jumping, or use of stairs, and short bathroom leash walks only. Crating, confinement to a small room, or even hospitalization may be recommended. This confinement allows the spinal cord inflammation to resolve without further destabilization of the area. Allowing your dog to be active too early may cause a significant relapse. Weight management is also an important aspect of managing back pain. A gradual return to activity is indicated following the rest period.
- 2) Medical treatment consists of anti-inflammatory drugs for pain. Rimadyl and Metacam are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory/analgesic drugs which may be used for pain relief, or we may prescribe prednisone, a steroid drug (side effects are usually mild and may include increased water consumption, increased appetite, and increased frequency of urination). Solu-Medrol, a strong injectable steroid medication, may be indicated for more severe cases. GI protectant drugs may be utilized with the above medications. We may also use muscle relaxants to control back spasms and pain, and to provide mild sedation - we frequently use diazepam (Valium), or a muscle relaxant called methocarbamol (Robaxin).

COSTS

A physical/ neurological exam will cost \$50-60. Radiographs may run from \$100-200. Bloodwork costs from \$125-175. Medications to conservatively treat back pain may run from \$30-70. Additional diagnostic testing, such as a myelogram or MRI may run \$1,000 or more. Again, it is very important to have an adequate confinement area for the pet at home; otherwise hospitalization is indicated.

Fortunately, back pain often responds well to conservative treatment and confinement. Your dog should improve rapidly on the prescribed regimen. If at any point pain is not resolving, or

additional neurological deficits such as paralysis are observed, please contact Indian Tree Animal Hospital immediately.