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Intervertebral Disk Disease

What is it?

Intervertebral disk disease (IVDD) is associated with disk degeneration and extrusion causing spinal cord compression and/or nerve root entrapment. Intervertebral disk disease is the most common neurological disorder diagnosed in veterinary patients. IVDD is a form of intervertebral disk disease and is equivalent to “slipping a disk” in humans. Certain breeds of dog are predisposed to having this type of problem, such as Dachshunds, Welsh Corgis, Beagles, Poodles and Cocker Spaniels. Between each bone in your spine is a shock-absorbing cushion called an intervertebral disk. With IVDD, this disk undergoes degenerative changes and loses its ability to absorb shock. When it “slips” it may compress either the spinal cord or nerve roots in that area and cause your dog to show neurologic abnormalities. This may manifest simply as pain, or it can be as severe as complete or partial paralysis. A stiff, stilted gait and reluctance to jump or move about, lowered head stance, and muscle spasm of the back are commonly seen.

Diagnosis

In most cases a diagnosis can be made based on clinical signs and physical exam findings. In cases where there are no neurological signs being displayed by the dog, cage rest and corticosteroids are the mainstay of therapy. If the animal is exhibiting neurological signs, radiographs are often helpful in identifying a narrowed disk space. If severe neurological signs are present, your veterinarian may want to do a myelogram. Under general anesthesia, a small amount of contrast agent is injected into the spinal cord area and a radiograph is then taken of the spine. The contrast material outlines the spinal cord so that if it is being compressed from a slipped disk it may be seen. The importance of having this information is that if your pet needs to go to surgery to correct the problem we need to know exactly which disk is slipped.

Treatment

Conservative vs. surgical treatment of patients with IVDD is dictated by the patient’s history and presenting neurologic signs. Patients presenting with severe neurologic signs are more likely to go to surgery than are those presenting with pain alone. The most important aspect of conservative management in patient’s with IVDD is strict kennel confinement for up to 6 weeks. After this period, a 3-4 week *gradual* return to normal activity is recommended. Walks should be restricted to a leash and harness; collars that encircle the neck should be eliminated. This duration of forced rest allows resolution of inflammation and facilitates stabilization of the ruptured disk by fibrosis. The prognosis for patients presenting with pain alone is favorable.

Antiinflammatory agents may be prescribed for your pet to make them more comfortable and speed healing of the spinal cord. Use them as directed and report any adverse effects to your veterinarian immediately.

Patients with severe neurologic signs and significant disk material within their spinal cord will likely need surgery to repair the slipped disk. This is an advanced surgery and requires that you be referred to a veterinary surgeon who could provide this service.