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## LIVER DISEASE

The liver is the largest gland in the body and serves many complex functions. Because its key role in many metabolic processes, the liver is subject to damage by a wide variety of diseases.

Liver disease is any destructive or metabolic disorder involving the liver and is not limited to any particular age or breed.

Our knowledge of liver disease in dogs and cats has increased significantly in the last several years and great advances in liver therapy have been made.

### Signs

The more common signs of liver disease in mature dogs and cats include:

- Lack of appetite and weight loss
- Depression (lack of energy or interest in usual routines)
- Jaundice (yellowing of the gums, whites of eyes, and even the skin)
- Increased thirst
- Dark colored urine

Other signs of illness associates with liver disease can include ascites (fluid build up in the abdomen), pale gums and associated bleeding tendencies. The pet's abdomen may be enlarged as a result of the fluid accumulation and enlargement of the liver. This sometimes leads owners to think their pet is obese or has gained weight.

These signs may appear very quickly or develop slowly. Other diseases may cause similar signs.

### Causes

There are many possible causes of liver disease. Often a specific diagnosis cannot be made. Some causes include:

- Viral and bacterial infections
- Poisonous substances eaten by the pet
- Altered blood flow to the liver as a result of heart disease or a congenital abnormality
- Some breeds such as Bedlingtons and West Highland White Terriers do not excrete copper as they should

In cats, a simple lack of appetite (not eating for two to three days) may result in a life threatening disease called hepatic lipidosis. Hepatic lipidosis occurs when fat builds up too high in the liver. This fat continues to accumulate until it overwhelms the

liver's ability to function. This problem is poorly understood, but the severity of the disease can be evaluated, and the best method of management will be prescribed.

## **Diagnosis**

Abdominal palpation (feeling the abdomen for abnormalities) can give an indication of liver enlargement. Examination of the tongue and gums is used to evaluate the presence or absence of the yellow discoloration associated with jaundice. It will probably be necessary to collect a blood sample to submit for laboratory evaluation. The level

of some enzymes in the blood is frequently elevated during liver disease and may indicate the type of disease. Another way to learn what is wrong is to do a liver biopsy.

To determine how well your pet is responding to therapy, some tests may be repeated periodically. Therefore, reexamination as directed will be necessary.