

INTERVERTEBRAL DISC DISEASE

The spine is made of bony segments called vertebrae, which are joined by ligaments and muscles. Between the vertebral segments lie fibrous structures called intervertebral discs. These discs act as shock absorbers between the bones. When a disc becomes diseased, either through gradual deterioration or injury, the disc can bulge upwards and place pressure on the spinal cord. This pressure can cause pain, weakness, incoordination or, in severe cases, paralysis. Depending on the location of the damaged disc, the symptoms may affect only the back limbs or may involve all four legs. Some affected pets may have difficulty with urination and defecation. Disc disease is usually diagnosed based on history, physical exam findings and radiographs (x-rays). In some cases, specialized radiographs or an MRI are needed to diagnose the condition or to highlight which discs are involved.

While any dog can suffer from intervertebral disc disease, some breeds are predisposed to the condition. It is most commonly seen in dogs with long backs such as Dachshunds. Dobermans and Great Danes are predisposed to developing a form of the disease that affects the neck. Pets who have had an episode of back problems in the past are at increased risk of further problems in the future.

Both medical and surgical treatments are used to treat intervertebral disc disease. In general, most pets with mild to moderate disc disease will recover following treatment with a combination of medication and strict rest. More severely affected pets require surgery if they are to regain full function. Such factors as age, severity and duration of symptoms and neurologic findings help determine whether surgery should be performed.

Exercise restriction is a very important part of the treatment for disc disease. Most affected animals require at least 1 to 2 weeks of exercise restriction. Your pet should be kept as quiet as possible. Do not allow your pet to run, jump, or climb stairs. Keep your pet on a leash when outside and take your pet outside only to eliminate. If you think your pet might be tempted to run around or jump up on furniture when you are not there, confine him to a small area or dog crate when unsupervised. When your pet is fully recovered, resume normal activity slowly over a period of several days to weeks.

If your pet is overweight, weight reduction is desirable, since excess weight puts additional strain on the back. In all cases, less food is necessary during the treatment period due to the exercise restriction. Some pets get quite bored when their food and exercise have been restricted. To help alleviate this, offer your pet extra chew toys and attention during the recovery period.

Be sure to give all medication as directed. Cortisones are commonly used to treat disc disease. Cortisones frequently cause side effects such as stomach irritation, increased thirst and urination, and panting. Always give cortisones with food and make sure your pet has easy access to plenty of water. Your pet may have urinary accidents while on cortisones due to the increased thirst and urination. To help prevent this, take your pet outside to urinate frequently.

Monitor your pet for the following problems and call the clinic immediately if any develop:

Your pet seems increasingly uncomfortable.

Your pet can no longer feel or use its hind legs.

Your pet vomits or has black or bloody stools.

Your pet loses control of its bowel movements or becomes constipated.

Your pet has difficulty urinating.

Your pet has breathing problems, rigid front legs, or seizures.