Conservative treatment for disc disease (IVDD)

Brief summary of what happened
The swollen, herniated disc puts pressure on the spinal cord and other nerve fibers in the area. This is painful and the pressure on the spinal cord prevents nerve impulses from passing between the brain and the rear part of the body. The animal may be unable to walk or control its colon or bladder. Severe damage to the spinal cord can lead to total paralysis. From Drs. Foster & Smith Pet Education

How owners can help
Healing happens on four levels during Conservative Treatment. Owners can be instrumental in achieving the goals of success in the first three areas for their dog. We humans, however, cannot control nerve healing, the body does most of the healing work itself on its own time schedule and to the extent possible. True success with IVDD is measured by the most important goal of returning your dog to a pain free, happy and full-of-love quality of life after crate rest. Should paralysis occur, please know that dogs do not view the lack of ability to walk as a minus as humans do. Dogs adjust to what is and then get on with the business of fully enjoying all that life has to offer until nerves repair!

What to expect at each level of healing

PAIN control happens in a matter of hours with the correct pain medications. The anti-inflammatory works on swelling, pain reliever(s) provide comfort until the inflammation is gone and a stomach protector reduces extra acids which anti-inflammatories produce. Signs of pain include yelping, arched back, reluctance to move, tight/tense stomach, trembling or shaking, or even holding a leg up and not wanting to use it (nerve root signature). Sometimes with a painful disc in the neck, the head will be held in an unusual position such as holding head down or nose up high.

Acupuncture/laser light therapy can be started right away to help reduce pain and stimulate the nerves to repair. Studies show pain actually slows the healing process not to mention enduring the pain from a disc episode is torturous. You will want to provide immediate feedback to your vet if pain breaks through before the next dose of medication. Signs of pain are trembling/shaking, not wanting to move, being more quiet than usual or yelping.

SWELLING of the spinal cord is resolved by using the big-gun medications rather than herbs. Glucocorticoids are synthetic versions of the body’s naturally occurring hormone, cortisol. Steroids are basically the most powerful of anti-inflammatories. With IVDD, an anti-inflammatory dose is used rather than a higher immune-suppressive dose used for other diseases. There are no safe medications. There are two safety factors with drugs. One is a vet who practices safe medicine with a blood test to verify the liver and kidneys are healthy prior to starting the medications. The other is an owner who is educated on what the side effects are and monitors their dog.

With mild symptoms of pain and no neurological deficits, some vets will choose a NSAID. NSAIDs also are potent drugs calling for owners to be self-educated about the side effects and a vet who checks the health of the kidneys and liver before prescribing.

When using either a steroid or NSAID, an acid reducer such as Pepcid AC is necessary. Dodgerslist follows those vets who are proactive in protecting the stomach, choosing not to wait until a bleeding ulcer or life-threatening stomach perforation happens. NOTE: FDA and manufacturer package inserts warn against use of a NSAID with a steroid or with another NSAID without a washout period before starting the new medication. Vets who practice safe medicine will look for a 4 to 7 day washout period between the medications.

For some dogs, swelling is resolved in about two weeks while others take more like a month on an anti-inflammatory. The tapering off of a steroid is a health necessity that also allows a peek into the status of swelling. If pain returns, your vet needs to know and likely more time on the steroid would be prescribed. No signs of pain means the steroid has done the job. NSAIDs do not require tapering off, but require the same observations of pain returning and contacting the vet promptly to extend use.

Monitoring neurological function
As damage to the spinal cord increases, there is a predictable path of deterioration.

- Pain caused by the tearing disc and the resulting swelling in the spinal cord
- Wobbly walking, legs cross
- Nails scuffing floor
- Paws knuckle
- Legs do not work (paralysis, dog is down)
- Bladder control is lost
- Tail wagging with joy is lost
- Deep pain sensation, the last neurological function, a critical indicator for successful surgery.

DAMAGED DISCS take about 8 weeks to heal and form secure scar tissue. There are no medications that help this along – only time and limited movement of the back and neck which is the purpose of crate rest. When a dog walks and moves, the vertebrae move, tearing down the important scar tissue that is forming to stabilize the disc rupture. Anytime out of the crate is a dangerous time for a healing disc. Only potty time and vet appointments are a necessity to be out of the crate. Be diligent about crate rest, cheating on crate rest promotes damage to the disc: no wheelchair, no chiropractic, no couches, no sleeping with you, no baths, or water therapy during the 8 weeks of 100% STRICT crate rest 24/7… only out at potty times.

Anytime out of the crate is a dangerous time for the spinal cord. At potty time care is taken to carry the dog to and from the potty place. A sling keeps the rear from tipping and the spine aligned. Either a fence or harness/leash limits footsteps to the very fewest.

REGAINING NEUROLOGICAL FUNCTIONS are as individual as each injury is different and each dog’s ability to heal is different. There is no time limit for nerves to heal. If deep pain perception is present, even in paralyzed legs, there is a chance your dog may be able to walk again. Thousands of dogs on Dodgerslist have regained functions in as little as 2 weeks, others 11 months, and still others 3 years later. IVDD is a disease of patience to allow the body to heal on its own terms. Acupuncture and Laser Therapy stimulate the cell’s metabolism that leads to the body’s natural repair abilities and can be started at any time.

Once nerves have repaired then muscles will also have to be retrained to relearn proper placement of the paws. Some muscles will need to regain strength for walking. Consider learning to walk again as it would be for a stroke victim or a baby learning to walk. At first, the steps will be weak and a bit unstable. Relearning to walk takes coordination, building up strength, and lots of patience.

Neurological function usually returns in this order. The first big sign you want to look for is that wonderful tail wag!

- Deep Pain Sensation (DPS) Correctly identified by a specialist.
- Tail wagging with joy at seeing you or getting a treat or meal.
- Bladder and bowel control.
- Leg movement, and then ability to move up into a standing position, and then wobbly walking.
- Being able to walk with more steadiness and properly placing the feet.
- Ability to walk unassisted and perhaps even run.

Future expectations There is good expectation for each IVDD dog. Many do regain the ability to walk. The most important recovery is for the dog to be pain free allowing him to resume a good quality of life… happy and pain free. There is always the possibility for return of leg and bladder control with time and patience. In the meantime, dogs do not consider themselves handicapped, they adjust and move forward with life, a good quality of life… enjoying life the same happy, loving way as always.

When surgery is a consideration

- If 100% STRICT crate rest has been employed and pain medications have been adjusted (dose, frequency, and mix of pain relievers) yet the pain can’t be brought under control
- STRICT crate rest is employed and after several attempts to go off of the anti-inflammatory, the pain returns
- With STRICT crate rest, neurological functions (legs and bladder control) worsen or are lost
- If a dog is experiencing similar signs of neck or back pain, or mild neurologic deficits for the 3rd or 4th time, meaning it is likely the same disc.

After a dog is paralyzed, the existence of deep pain sensation is an indicator that surgery could STILL be successful. That window of time is 12-24 hours from losing deep pain sensation (DPS). Even after that window of time, surgery is often successful. The spinal cord is very fragile, the more hours after the window, the less chance of a complete recovery.

No or low-interest credit for veterinary costs can be obtained from www.carecredit.com You can find out online if you qualify.

Surgery on the spinal cord takes a well-trained surgeon for this most delicate and tricky of surgeries. Board-certified neuro (ACVIM) and ortho (ACVS) surgical specialists can be found at university vet teaching hospitals and in private hospitals. Your vet will give you a referral.

Disclaimer:

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