Dog Neurological Disorders: Wobbler Syndrome

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focus on neurological disorders

Does your dog seem to have a wobbly stride?

WOBBLER SYNDROME

Wobbler syndrome (also called Cervical Vertebral Instability) is a condition seen in dogs and horses. It occurs when the cervical vertebrae (the bones in the neck that surround the spinal cord) are improperly formed. These abnormalities in the cervical vertebrae cause compression of the spinal cord in the neck, leading to weakness and an unsteady gait.

Abnormalities in the cervical vertebrae also cause a lot of pressure on the fluid-filled discs that serve as cushions between the vertebrae. Eventually, the discs degenerate and may rupture, putting additional pressure on the spinal cord and causing even more problems with movement.

In dogs, wobbler syndrome is most common in giant and large breeds, such as Mastiffs, Great Danes and Doberman Pinschers. In these breeds, the skeletal problem is usually in the last three vertebrae of the neck. Great Danes and Mastiffs tend to show clinical signs as young animals, while Dobermans and most other large breeds usually do not have serious problems until middle age or older. Other breeds prone to wobblers include Saint Bernards, Irish Setters, Dalmatians, and German Shepherds.

The cause of wobbler syndrome is unknown, but it is thought that there is a genetic component. Nutrition may also play a part. Studies have shown that in some young dogs a diet excessively high in protein, calories, calcium, and phosphorus accelerates growth. This may cause the type of skeletal changes seen in dogs with this syndrome. Owners of large breed puppies should discuss this topic with their veterinarian at their dog's first visit.

Dogs with wobbler syndrome often show the following problems when they move:

- The head is carried stiffly, or bent down.
- When walking, the dog appears stiff or clumsy, with the stiffness worse in the hind limbs. He may drag or scuff his hind toes. Early on, he usually won't whine or seem to be in pain. He may walk with his hind legs spread wider than normal, for better balance.
- The dog will probably seem fairly normal while walking in a straight line, but appear uncoordinated or "drunk", or even fall down, when he tries to turn quickly.

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Since other diseases may look similar to wobbler syndrome, it's important to have your pet examined by your veterinarian right away if you think you see abnormalities in the way your dog moves. Regular x-rays are usually not sufficient to diagnose wobbler syndrome. A special x-ray procedure called a myelogram is used. The animal is anesthetized and then a small amount of fluorescent dye is carefully injected into the space around the spinal cord. When this is x-rayed, the dye outlines the spinal cord, making it possible to determine exactly where the spinal cord compression is, and the amount of swelling present.

Treatment for wobbler syndrome involves administration of steroid medication to decrease the swelling in the compressed area of the spinal cord. However, in most cases, surgery is eventually necessary to remove any ruptured disc material and stabilize the vertebrae causing the problem. The prognosis for the future depends on how much movement the dog had before surgery. If the dog was uncoordinated before surgery but still able to walk, a much better outcome is expected than if the dog was paralyzed.

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