Cases From Our Clinic: Thoraco-lumbar Injury

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

a lame *dachshund*

WE REMEMBER a case from years ago, one involving an 8-year-old Dachshund named Hunter. This dog had always been active and happy, until one night when he had been playing with a Lab friend, he came home limping and whining. His owners were worried, so they put him on his bed by the wood stove and watched him. They noticed throughout the evening that he was having trouble walking and was dragging his hind legs. That is when they brought him in to us.

As we observed Hunter walk, his rear feet were obviously dragging and he was unable to bear weight on them. He still had pain perception in his rear legs, though, which was a good sign, suggesting his spinal cord still had some function. We highly suspected that he had a ruptured or herniated disc in the area of his spine below the chest but above the tail - called the thoraco-lumbar region. The thoraco-lumbar region of the spine is prone to injury because this is where the spiral column changes from the fairly rigid thoracic spine of the chest to the flexible lumbar spine. When we took x-rays, there was a severe narrowing of the space between two vertebrae, suggestive of a herniated disk. Today, we would have advised a myelogram to pinpoint the site of the problem. A myelogram is a precedure in which a special dye is placed around the spinal cord and x-rays are taken.

The spinal column

A dog's spine is made up of small bones called vertebrae that extend from the base of the skull all the way to the end of the tail. The vertebrae are interconnected by intervertebral discs - flexible discs made of a cartilage like material - which protect and cushion. The spinal cord, a mass of nerve fibers that runs between the brain and the rest the body, lies within these vertebrae. A herniated disc can put pressure on the spinal cord and disrupt nerve function. Hunter's herniated disc was pinching the nerves that controlled his rear legs. Hunter's owners were right to seek veterinary care as soon as they could. If not treated aggressively, this condition could cause permanent paralysis.

Treatment: medical or surgical?

Treatment of a herniated disc almost always includes the use of anti-inflammatory medications such as corticosteroids *or* NSAIDS (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) such as Rimadyl, Novox, Deramaxx, or Previcox. These products, and time, may help shrink the swelling of the herniated disc and surrounding tissue and relieve any inflammation of the spinal cord. This treatment is combined with strict cage rest of the dog and pain control. Range of motion and rehabilitation exercises are used during recovery.

Surgery is another option, reserved for those cases where there are more serious signs of spinal cord damage. Hunter's owners opted for the surgery, so we went in and removed the disc and a section of the vertebrae to give more room to the swelling spinal cord.

Outcome

Hunter came through the surgery well. We advised Hunter's owners to keep him quiet with absolutely no jumping. Although it

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took months, Hunter seemed to make a complete recovery.

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