Canine Cognitive Dysfunction in Aging Pets

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As our canine population is living longer, more pet owners than ever may notice behavior problems that affect geriatric dogs the same way Alzheimer's disease affects humans. This syndrome has been named Canine Cognitive Dysfunction (CCD) or Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CDS).

Studies have shown that many older dogs with geriatric behavior problems have lesions in their brains similar to those that physicians see in Alzheimer's patients.

According to Pfizer Pharmaceutical, 62% of dogs who are 10 years of age and older will experience at least some of the following symptoms, which could indicate canine cognitive dysfunction:

- Confusion or disorientation. The dog may get lost in his own back yard, or get trapped in corners or behind furniture.
- Pacing and being awake all night, or a change in sleeping patterns.
- Loss of housetraining abilities. A previously housetrained dog may not remember to signal to go outside, and may urinate or defecate where he normally would not.
- Anxiety and increased irritability.
- Increased vocalization.

Helpful Support

Environmental enrichments that are helpful include living with another dog, increased interaction with owners, training (or any active learning), and playing with toys daily. Omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants can support healthy brain tissue and are often recommended for older dogs.

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- Apathy.
- Decreased activity level.
- Decreased attentiveness or staring into space.
- Not recognizing friends or family members.
- Decreased ability to perform certain tasks (e.g., tricks) or respond to commands.

To make a diagnosis of CCD, your veterinarian will rule out other causes of the behavior problem. For example, decreased activity may be due to an advancing arthritic condition; inattentiveness may be the result of vision or hearing loss. A dog who shows signs of cognitive dysfunction should receive a full physical examination; have appropriate laboratory tests, and possibly specialized tests such as an ECG.

If your veterinarian has determined that your dog has CCD, he will probably recommend a treatment for this disorder. A drug called Selegiline or L.Deprenyl, (brand name Anipryl), although not a cure, has been shown to alleviate some of the symptoms of CCD. If the dog responds, he will need to be treated daily for the rest of his life. As with all medications, there are side effects and dogs with certain conditions should not be given Anipryl. For instance, if your dog is on Mitaban for external parasites, Anipryl should not be given. Your veterinarian will discuss these problems with you.

Your veterinarian may recommend the use of antioxidants, Omega-3 fatty acids, or senior diets. In addition, dogs with CCD should continue to receive regular exercise and play.

If your older dog is experiencing behavior problems, talk to your veterinarian. There may be multiple ways to help your pet have a more happy and healthy life in his senior years.

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