

## Dog Neurological Disorders: Vestibular Disease

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*



Every once in a while we get a call from a concerned pet owner, reporting that his dog suddenly cannot walk in a straight line, and seems to be falling over to one side. The pet's head is often tilted to the same side, and their eyes may be moving rapidly from side to side or up and down. Usually people tell us their pet seemed just fine the night before, but woke up like this today.

Owners are understandably worried, and they often ask us, "Can dogs have strokes like people can?" While [strokes](#) are uncommon in dogs, they do sometimes occur. However, what we're describing here is more likely a condition called vestibular disease, which is fairly common, especially in older pets.

**Your dog may have Vestibular Disease.** The vestibular system is found in cats and humans in addition to dogs. It includes structures in the middle ear, nerves that carry signals from the middle ear to the brain, and parts of the brain itself. It controls the sense of movement and balance. It helps us know whether we're upright or upside down, sitting still or moving, and it allows us to watch moving objects without feeling dizzy. A problem with the vestibular system can make us feel disoriented, dizzy and nauseated.

**For any animal having problems walking,** a visit to the veterinarian is in order, as soon as possible. Your veterinarian is able to rule out other conditions such as intervertebral disc disease, which must be treated immediately for the best outcome. If your veterinarian suspects vestibular disease, a neurological examination can help provide more information about the cause.

**Vestibular disease is often caused by infection in the middle ear,** which can irritate the structures of the ear and the associated nerves, leading to balance problems and

nausea. This is common in dogs who have a history of previous ear infections. The next step in this case is usually radiographs (x-rays) of the skull, followed by deep cleaning and treatment under anesthesia.

**Vestibular disease can also be caused by a problem in the brain**, such as a tumor, stroke, or infection. A neurological examination can be done, and the results can be used to evaluate the likelihood of a problem in the brain. If a brain lesion is suspected, further testing, such as blood work and MRI are usually recommended. However, even with testing, in many cases we are unable to identify the underlying reason for vestibular disease, in which case it is termed idiopathic (unknown cause). This form of vestibular disease often begins to improve on its own in just a few days.

**Because the idiopathic form of vestibular disease is quite common**, your veterinarian may suggest waiting a few days before having any further diagnostic tests done, since these usually require referral and can be quite costly. In the meantime, nausea can be controlled with medication and the pet can be hand fed and helped outside to go to the bathroom. An elevated feeder can make it easier for the pet to drink. Although vestibular disease comes on quickly and is very dramatic, many animals recover completely after a few days or several weeks.