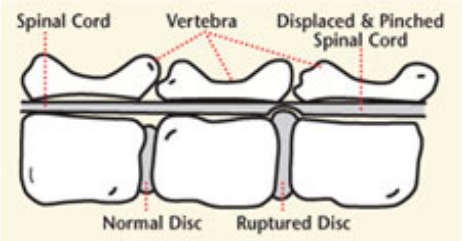
Dog Neurological Disorders: Intervertebral Disc Disease

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

focus on neurological disorders

Does your pet limp or show signs of paralysis?

The spine is made up of numerous small bones called vertebrae. The vertebrae are separated by flexible "intervertebral discs" that cushion. The vertebrae each have a tunnel running through them. The spinal cord runs through these tunnels, where it is protected by the bone surrounding it, except for the places in between the vertebrae where it runs over the top of the discs.



A disc may rupture, or herniate, causing a portion of the disc to protrude upward and place pressure on the spinal cord. The pressure on the spinal cord can cause pain, weakness, paralysis, loss of sensation, and the inability to control urination and defecation. This is a very serious condition and it is imperative that you seek veterinary care immediately. Your dog may have IVDD (Intervertebral Disc Disease).

In many cases, we may never find exactly when or what caused the disc to rupture. Although a herniated disc may be associated with severe trauma such as being hit by a car or falling from heights, this cause is relatively uncommon. In the smaller breeds, it often occurs when these dogs jump off furniture.

The veterinarian suspects a herniated disc based on a physical exam, the history, and the symptoms. Radiographs support the diagnosis. A myelogram (a special x-ray using dye), MRI, or CAT scan can pinpoint the exact location of the disc problem. More than 1 disc may be involved.

Nonsurgical therapy is used when the symptoms are mild. Treatment may include temporarily confining the animal to a cage or very small area, making sure the dog doesn't jump, run, twist, or move in a way that could further injure the area. Usually either a corticosteroid such as prednisone, or a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) such as Rimadyl (carprofen), Etodolac (Generic), or Deramaxx (deracoxib) is recommended. These medications help reduce the swelling around the spinal cord. Do not use pain relievers without consulting first with your veterinarian. Acupuncture can also be used to help relieve the symptoms.

Surgery is considered in certain cases such as if there is severe pain, or there are more severe nervous system signs. The protruding disc material and/or portion of the bone that surrounds the spinal cord may be removed to help relieve the pressure. Surgery must be done within the first day or so following the injury to be most effective. Following surgery, the dog must be kept in strict confinement as described above. Whether medical, surgical, or a combination of the two treatments is used, it may be several weeks to a month or more before the dog has achieved maximum healing.

Prognosis is generally good if the dog can still feel deep pain in the affected limbs when presented for treatment and the treatment is provided rapidly. The prognosis is more guarded if there is paralysis or reduced deep pain sensation. The possibility of walking again is poor if the animal is paralyzed and has lost deep pain sensation or treatment is delayed

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*