

Intervertebral Disk (Ruptured Disk) Disease

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Basset Hounds are among the breeds that are more susceptible to intervertebral disk disease.

Your dog's spine is made up of numerous small bones called vertebrae that extend from the base of his skull all the way through his tail. Vertebrae are connected by intervertebral disks, flexible cartilage-like "cushions" between each bone that allow the neck, spine, and tail to bend. Each vertebra has a center tunnel, through which the spinal cord (a mass of nerve fibers that connect the brain with the rest of the body) runs. The vertebrae protect the spinal cord with bone; between the vertebrae, however, the spinal cord sits atop intervertebral disks (see diagram on left).

What is intervertebral disk disease?

Age or trauma may cause disks to rupture (herniate), resulting in a portion of the disk protruding upward, compressing the spinal cord, and inhibiting nerve transmission along the cord. A ruptured disk may occur suddenly or gradually. Veterinarians often cannot pinpoint the cause of a ruptured disk. Although it may be associated with severe trauma such as being hit by a car, this cause is relatively uncommon. In smaller breeds, herniation often occurs when a dog jumps from furniture.

Which breeds are more susceptible to intervertebral disk disease?

Certain breeds of dogs including Dachshunds, Basset Hounds, Beagles, Cocker Spaniels, Shih Tzus, Lhasa Apsos, Pekingese, and Corgis have a greater incidence of disk disease. They are more likely to have genetic factors that increase the risk of the disease.

What are the symptoms of a ruptured disk?

The first sign of a ruptured disk is usually intense pain. Depending upon the amount and severity of the pressure and its location in the spine, symptoms can also include weakness, paralysis, loss of sensation, and the inability to control urination and defecation. In severe herniations, the back legs will be partially or completely paralyzed. This may be temporary or permanent. The nerves affecting the bladder and colon may also be affected, making urination or defecation difficult; this is a very serious condition that requires immediate veterinary care.

How is intervertebral disk disease treated?

Dogs with mild herniations require temporary confinement in a small space (ideally a [cage or crate](#)) to limit movement and the potential for further injury. Your veterinarian will also likely prescribe pain medication and a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) such as [Quellin™](#) or [Rimadyl](#) to help reduce the swelling around the spinal cord. Dogs suffering severe herniations may require surgery to remove the protruding disk material and/or a portion of the bone surrounding the spinal cord. This surgery almost always requires the expertise of a specialist, and must be performed within hours of the injury. Full healing typically takes several weeks or months.

If you suspect your dog has a ruptured disk, see your veterinarian right away for a definitive diagnosis and the best possible chance for recovery.