

UNDER THE WEATHER

Spondylosis in Pets

We've all seen people walking around with a belt supporting their neck or back when they have spondylosis. What many of us don't realise is that dogs can have the same problem, which is a degenerative, age related problem.

Spondylosis, or more specifically, Spondylosis Deformans, is a condition that affects dogs and cats above seven years of age, although it starts around middle age. It affects dogs more than cats, and the larger breeds like Boxers, German Shepherds and Labradors are more likely to be affected, although smaller breeds like Dachshunds and Cocker Spaniels are known to suffer from it, too.

As our pets age, their spine deteriorates (usually due to repetitive pressure on the joints) and this is seen as bony spurs along the vertebrae. These are called osteophytes, and they sometimes fuse together to form bony bridges along the length of the spine as the disease advances. These spurs are easily seen on X-rays, and look like tiny claws disturbing the smooth, rounded contours of a normal vertebra. In pets, the thoracic (chest) and the lumbar (spine) vertebrae are most likely to be affected.

Sometimes the spongy disc between two vertebrae also hardens and cracks, resulting in a leak of the pulpy tissue in it (or the disc itself). This is commonly called slip disc, and medically referred to as IVDD (intervertebral disc disease).

Most pets show no symptoms at all in the early phase of this disease, and it is often diagnosed as a coincidental finding when X-rays are done for some other reason (which is just as well, since our perception of our pet's pain may be delayed due to their resilience!)

As the disease progresses, the pet starts showing symptoms of stiffness (difficulty or delay in getting up) and restricted motion. They may not be as active or eager to go for their routine walks and may find it difficult to climb stairs. As the disease progresses and the the spinal cord itself is affected,



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varying degrees of weakness, pain and paralysis are seen, ranging from slight weakness to buckling of paws to complete paralysis.

Your vet will diagnose the problem with a full physical and neurological examination, followed by necessary blood tests and X-rays. From your side, give a brief but thorough history – when did the symptoms start, were they of sudden onset or gradual, how bad is the stiffness or pain, are the symptoms more pronounced after rest or exercise, appetite, urination and stool, etc. An MRI may be needed if compression of the spinal cord is suspected.

Most cases of spondylosis are managed with painkillers and rest on an outpatient

basis. Some advanced cases of disc prolapse may need spinal surgery to relieve pressure on the spinal cord. Some patients with mild compression of the cord may be given oral or injectable steroids to reduce the inflammation around it.

Before any painkillers or steroids are administered, make sure the blood reports are normal, since it is dangerous to give these medicines if the liver or kidneys have deteriorated. They should only be given after food, as they can cause ulcers if given on an empty stomach. Make sure you follow your vet's instructions about medical care as well as rest and physiotherapy for your pet with spondylosis.

Nutritional supplements are also given to improve the connective tissues of the spine. These usually contain bovine cartilage, Vitamin C, manganese, magnesium, zinc, amino acids and other ingredients. Acupuncture and hydrotherapy is also used by some practitioners to manage pain associated with the condition.

Lastly, when your pet has been diagnosed with spondylosis, avoid any high impact exercises or jumping to prevent a disc prolapse. With modern painkillers and supportive treatment, your pet can live a full and pain-free life with spondylosis if detected early.

