

UNDER THE WEATHER

The Curious Case of EPI

Scooby walked in and I was alarmed to see him – he looked thin, almost skeletal, yet he was confident and friendly and his long, German Shepherd coat was well maintained. We took his weight, 21 kgs, alarming, considering he was a German Shepherd. “You are the seventh vet I am visiting. We’ve done all possible tests, found nothing; yet he continues to lose weight in spite of a healthy appetite.”

Scooby was only three years old, too young to have malignancy high on my list of possible diagnoses. His stools had been checked for worms, there was no protein loss through urine, his blood counts were normal and all his major organs – liver, kidney, heart seemed to be in fine fettle.

How are his stools? I asked his guardian. “They are normal, in fact he defecates quite a large amount every time he goes out for a walk.” This was my cue, I tested him for EPI, confirmed the diagnosis, and today Scooby is a happy, healthy dog weighing 35 kgs.

So what exactly is Exocrine Pancreatic Insufficiency? It is basically an insufficiency of the digestive enzymes produced by the pancreas. The pancreas is the organ responsible for producing insulin as well as digestive enzymes. If the pancreas is underdeveloped or shrunk, it fails to produce enzymes needed to digest and assimilate fat, protein and carbohydrates. These nutrients then pass undigested in stools, leading to diarrhoea, voluminous stools and weight loss. German Shepherds are prone to this problem (hereditary) compared to other breeds. (More than half of EPI cases are seen in GSDs).

The most common cause of EPI is atrophy or hypoplasia (underdeveloped pancreas), followed by chronic pancreatitis. If it is chronic pancreatitis, it’s possible your pet also has concurrent diabetes, and should be checked and treated for that.

It is not easy to diagnose EPI, since the tests to confirm



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diagnosis are not readily available in India. Blood tests like TLI (trypsin like immunoreactivity), pancreatic elastase test and sometimes even a biopsy of the pancreas is needed to confirm diagnosis.

EPI can cause an overgrowth of bacteria in the small intestine due to improper absorption of nutrients. Due to this, undigested food sits longer in the intestines and is attacked by ‘bad bacteria’. These bacteria are normally present, but are held in check by the ‘good bacteria’ needed for digestion. This is known as SIBO (small intestinal bacterial overgrowth) and can cause infectious diarrhoea, smelly stools, flatulence and coprophagia (where the dog eats his own stool). SIBO needs to be treated separately with antibiotics.

Once EPI diagnosis is confirmed, your pet will need lifelong supplementation with dried pancreatic powder available as capsules. This powder can be mixed with food and given twice daily. Your pet’s vitamin B12 level will need to be checked, since 50% of dogs with EPI have a B12 deficiency. Injections of Vitamin B12 can be given once a month initially. Extra virgin coconut oil can also be added to the diet to improve health and increase weight. High fibre and high fat diets should be avoided, since they are difficult to digest. Once treatment is started, the diarrhoea should stop in about a week, and the weight should come to normal in 3-4 months. The dosage of pancreatic enzymes is increased or decreased according to the response of the patient.

The supplements needed to manage EPI in dogs are expensive, however, there are human preparations called *Creon* capsules which are just as effective. Some resourceful people even give bovine pancreas sourced from the neighbourhood butcher.

Since this condition is inherited, breeding of dogs with this condition is not advised. The good part of this disease is that once diagnosed, your pet can lead a long and healthy life with supplements.




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