

## Be Alert for Subtle Health Issues in Your Dog

**Many of the diseases that cause kidney damage can be treated, thereby preventing further damage.**

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After 34 years of on-the-job training, I'm still learning. Veterinary medicine can be a humbling endeavor because we never know everything about diseases, surgery, nutrition, behavior and other quality-of-life issues affecting our canine patients.

I'll never forget the wake-up call I got my first week of "real" work after graduation from veterinary school. My very sick Miniature Schnauzer patient, Fritzie, had been vomiting, was dehydrated, and showed typical signs of kidney failure. We ran a blood chemistry panel and urinalysis. As I hooked up the patient to the IV fluids, I asked one of the veteran doctors to have a look at the patient and the lab reports.

"He's in kidney failure, so I'm not very optimistic for a recovery but the owners want us to do whatever we can for him," I related. After reviewing the records and looking at the patient the staff veterinarian said, "Well, he's surely got failing kidneys, Dr. Dunn, but look at these chemistry values; the kidney failure is secondary to the primary problem, which may very well be an adrenal gland dysfunction called Addison's disease." So I was right, and I was wrong. We needed to do a few more tests and add medications to Fritzie's therapy, and in three days he was back on the road to good health. I learned an invaluable lesson in my first week of practice: the need to be alert for subtle, underlying dysfunction in my patients.

Dog owners don't know what they don't know. That's where the veterinarian needs to step in and assist in uncovering disorders that may not be self-evident. Bladder stones are a great example. They don't form overnight, and often will be present in a dog's bladder for years before the owner notices blood in the urine or irregular urinating habits. A yearly physical exam with bladder palpation by the veterinarian and a urine analysis would surely point to bladder stones if any were present.

Kidney disease ranks high on the list of serious health threats, too. And you may have no idea that your dog is passing trace amounts of blood, bacteria or protein in the urine, or even depositing scar tissue in the kidneys, until it's too late to do anything about it. According to Paul Cleland, DVM of the Heska Corp., a veterinary diagnostic company, more than 20 percent of middle-aged and older dogs have small amounts of protein in the urine, an abnormality that can indicate the presence of underlying kidney damage or urinary tract infections.

Once identified, many of the diseases that cause kidney damage (such as dental disease) can be treated, thereby preventing further damage. Cleland says, "[Testing] for detection of low levels of protein in the urine allows veterinarians to identify those patients that will benefit from closer monitoring and diagnosis of underlying diseases. Early diagnosis and treatment is our best defense against chronic disease in our pets."