

Good Dog, Bad Hips

13 options for managing canine hip dysplasia.

Marcia King

The moment Jean Hessenauer of Maryland saw Pete, an 8-month-old German Shepherd Dog being offered for adoption at a local pet-supply store, she fell in love. “We already had a Shepherd mix and a Great Pyrenees,” she recalls. “But I had always wanted a Shepherd, and as soon as I saw him I knew I had to have him.”

Pete settled in nicely with the other family dogs and, typical of a young GSD, was affectionate, energetic, and very active. As he matured into young adulthood, he calmed down and Hessenauer planned to compete with him in obedience trials.

But when he was around 4 years old, Pete started having problems: “When he was playing and running, he would suddenly yelp and turn and bite at his back leg,” Hessenauer says. “Then he would hold his leg up for several minutes.” A veterinary examination found that Pete had chronic hip dysplasia.

Chronic hip dysplasia means many things for many dogs. For some, it's surgery and a good-as-new hip. For others, it's modifications in management and lifestyle, in exchange for a pretty normal, comfortable life. And for a few, it's an ongoing battle with pain and disability.

There are plenty of ways of dealing with CHD, depending upon your dog's age when diagnosed, whether he is mildly or severely affected, and whether he responds to conservative treatment, as well as financial considerations. Here are 13 treatment options:

1. Juvenile pubic symphysiodesis. A short surgical procedure performed on puppies before 20 weeks of age, JPS is the cheapest of all surgical options. Often combined with an early spay or neuter, JPS cauterizes growing cartilage cells in the hip, altering the growing hip angle, and providing a tighter hip. Explains Darryl Millis, DVM, diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and professor of orthopedic surgery at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, “Most puppies aren't symptomatic by that age, but for high-risk breeds or loose-hipped puppies, it may be beneficial to perform JPS” preventively during a spay or neuter.
2. Triple pelvic osteotomy. The pelvic bone is cut in three places during this procedure and repositioned to better secure the head of the thigh bone. “TPO is best performed in still-developing dogs with minimal or no arthritic changes,” Millis says. “TPO doesn't work as well after arthritic changes have occurred. That's a mistake some dog owners make: They adopt a wait-and-see attitude and in as little as two to four weeks lose their window of opportunity for that procedure.”
3. Weight control. This is one of the most effective and important components for managing CHD. For many overweight dogs, just dropping the extra pounds is enough to decrease or eliminate joint pain, says Craig Prior, BVSc, a practitioner at and partner in Murphy Road Animal Hospital in Tennessee.
4. Exercise. “Regular, low-impact activity reduces some of the pain present in arthritic joints, leading to improved strength and performance,” Millis says.

Examples of low-impact exercise include: Swimming, an excellent, no-impact exercise. “Dancing” the dog forward. Says Millis, “Picking up the dog's forelimbs and walking him forward — the human partner is walking backwards — strengthens the gluteal muscles and helps reduce arthritis pain. But don't walk the dog backward, which could cause hip pain because of the more extended position of the hip joint.” Leash walks, as long as you don't exercise the dog to the point of stiffness or lameness. Each dog is different, so the distance and speed of their walks will vary. Avoid “weekend warrior” tactics, Prior warns. Instead of taking your dog on one long walk each weekend, take him shorter distances more frequently throughout the week.

5. Joint formulas. Supplements can decrease joint inflammation and promote cartilage healing. Studies in arthritic humans found that glucosamine-chondroitin supplements helped those with moderate to severe knee pain, Millis says. “There haven't been any well-controlled, long-term studies in animals, though.” Prior adds, “Polysulfated glycosaminoglycan injections (Adequan) are FDA-approved for use in dogs and produce good results in many dogs.”

6. Joint prescription diets. Millis recommends those that contain glucosamine, chondroitin, and omega-3 fatty acids for

best results (some contain just glucosamine and chondroitin). These diets replace the need for separate supplementation, he says.

7. Pain medications. “NSAIDs [nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs] can be very effective in reducing pain and inflammation,” Prior says. “Some animals do well on one. Others animals do better on another. So you may have to try a couple before finding one that works best in your dog.” If those don’t help, your veterinarian might prescribe tramadol, an opioid-like drug. “Any drug can cause serious side effects in an individual, so be sure to have your dog’s blood checked regularly for abnormalities.”

8. TENS. Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation uses electrical impulse to reduce pain. “We found positive response to that,” Millis says.

9. ESWT. Extracorporeal shockwave therapy utilizes sound waves to induce pain relief. “We tested dogs that were pretty bad and found, in general, a single treatment lasted several months,” Millis says. Studies elsewhere found less severely affected dogs achieved pain relief for up to two years.

10. Physiotherapy and rehabilitation. Together these are terrific for increasing range of motion in joints, and especially helpful for dogs who are reluctant to bear weight on their limbs, Prior says.

11. A dog-friendly environment. Prior recommends providing ramps or steps for dogs jumping up into the car or bed and limiting stair climbing as it aggravates the hips. To reduce morning stiffness, use orthopedic beds — the eggshell mattresses and Tempur-Pedic materials. Place a heating pad under your dog’s bed in cold weather.

12. Total hip replacement surgery. Although expensive, it provides the dog with a normal, albeit artificial, hip. “Many dogs have a pretty profound improvement in their quality of their life,” Millis reports.

13. Femoral head and neck incision. This is best for dogs weighing less than 50 pounds. It removes and replaces the head of the thigh bone with muscle or joint tissues, forming a false joint. Generally good to excellent results.

With more options than ever, the chances are greater that you’ll be able to find a treatment that helps your dog remain comfortable and active. Hessenauer did: Pete was prescribed an NSAID and joint formula and allowed off-leash, self-limited easy loping a few times a week.

“After about three months, there were no signs of hip problems,” Hessenauer says. Gradually, she weaned him off the pain medication and today, at age 6 1/2, Pete remains pain-free, runs without problems, and is starting rally obedience training.

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