

Cutting-Edge Care for Older Dogs

Advances in treatment of 15 geriatric diseases for dogs parallel those for humans.

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Liver Disease Red flags: Jaundice, vomiting, disorientation, seizures, weakness, increased thirst and urination, distended abdomen.

What's wrong?: Chronic hepatitis (inflammation) or cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver causes backup of bile, and liver cells can't detoxify the blood and help digestion. Hepatitis and cirrhosis may be a result of bacterial or virus infections, auto-immune disease (where the body's immune system attacks itself) and environmental toxins. Cancer is also a possibility.

Treatment: Ursodeoxycholic acid oral tablets treat bile backup by inhibiting production of harmful acids. Oral medications that prevent toxin absorption, such as cholestyramine, lactulose and metronidazole, treat disorientation and seizures. Therapeutic diets with adjusted nutrient levels decrease workload on the liver and can reduce symptoms. The immune-suppressing drugs prednisone and azathioprine treat auto-immune inflammation.

Intervertebral Disk Disease Red flags: Hunched back, reluctance to move, pain, weakness, wobbly gait or dragging leg(s), urine or fecal incontinence and paralysis.

What's wrong?: The soft disk material in your dog's spine has bulged out (herniated) from between vertebrae and is causing swelling of the spinal cord or nerve roots.

Treatment: For sudden disk injury, intravenous injection of the corticosteroid methylprednisolone sodium succinate, a potent anti-inflammatory, reduces swelling. If your dog becomes paralyzed or weak, early surgery is the best treatment. Injecting an enzyme, such as chymopapain or collagenase into the affected disk, or laser surgery, are alternative treatments. Mild symptoms are treated with rest and anti-inflammatories.

Digestive Problems Red flags: Reduced appetite, intermittent vomiting or diarrhea, or weight loss despite a good appetite.

What's wrong?: Changes of vital organs may reduce your dog's capacity to clear by-products of daily metabolism, and the excess waste acts like poison. Stomach pain and inflammation reduce appetite and interfere with absorbing nutrients.

Treatment: Commercial therapeutic diets help dogs with liver or kidney disease. If a specific disease isn't diagnosed, your dog may respond to a diet designed for easiest digestion.