

Breathing and Coughing Complications

An inflamed trachea may be why your dog has difficulty breathing.

Jon Geller, DVM

Q. I have a 14-year-old female Basset Hound. She is spayed. She sees our vet regularly. Over the Christmas holidays we had a lot of family over, which resulted in her woofing for a very long time to the point that she got hoarse. When she went back to the vet for her swim therapy (she has weak hind legs from a previous disc surgery and she uses her wheels for balance), I asked the vet to check her out she sounded like a cross between Janis Joplin and Stevie Nix.

I have tried to keep her quiet, relaxed and resting so she would heal up, but it seems to be getting worse. Every time I mention it not getting better, I get brushed off. In the last week, her wheezing has gotten worse. Particularly when she tries to eat. She loves to eat, so appetite is not a problem, but the wheezing appears to hamper her ability to breathe and eat, so she makes this wheezing sound while eating. She looks like she's holding her breath to eat, and sometimes after eating she'll make this coughing sound, much like an old man clearing his throat. Right now she's asleep at my feet making a gurgling noise.

A. It really is tough when your dog gets older and things just start to go wrong. However, even as veterinarians, we sometimes will explain away clinical signs and symptoms such as "old age." We always have to remind ourselves that old age is not a disease.

I'm very impressed that you're such a committed dog owner, and would bring your dog in regularly for swim therapy. I'm equally impressed your dog has a voice as raspy as Janis Joplin and Stevie Nicks. All kidding aside, if your elderly Basset Hound is not improving, I would politely persist in asking your veterinarian for work-up and treatment.

Sometimes a prescription of low-dose steroids can help an inflamed trachea (airway and larynx) heal up. Based on the history of extended periods of barking, the diagnosis is most likely tracheitis (inflamed trachea), just as your veterinarian suspects. However, if your dog is already on a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug for arthritis, steroid treatment is not an option due to the high risk of stomach or intestinal ulcers.

If there is no improvement, the next step would be X-rays of your Basset's neck in case there is a mass or tumor pushing on the trachea.

There's a delicate balance between allowing time for inflammation to heal on its own, and pursuing definitive work-up and treatment. You should feel free to follow up with your veterinarian if your dog is not improving as expected.

Best, Jon Geller, DVM

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