

'Collapsing' Boston Terrier Needs Heart Monitor

A dog who collapses most likely has heart disease or narcolepsy.

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Q. In the spring, my 10-year-old male Boston Terrier started to "weave" or "droop," then suddenly collapse onto the floor with a loud thud. His vet did a blood test and said he had some liver trouble and put him on SAM-e for two months. That did improve him somewhat.

Now, for the last month and a half, he has begun the collapsing again. I sent my vet a video of what he was doing so he could see it. He "hasn't had time" to watch it. I'm disappointed and worried.

When Pepper is outside with one of us, he will walk around and do his usual doggie stuff and seems to have no problem.

Once he comes inside and his brain is not actively engaged, he slows down and comes to a stop, either standing or sitting and his drooping and arousing, drooping and arousing, goes on and on and on. He appears to be trying to go to sleep, but keeps fighting it and won't let himself give in to it and lie down. I'd say he's wearing himself out just trying to not give in to it. I can tell him to go lie down, but he'll only get up and move to another spot, stop, and start the whole process all over again.

When he's standing, you can see when the episode begins as he goes from a straight back to a sway back, and his stomach seems to heave as though he's having trouble breathing.

I would appreciate your opinion.

A. One of the challenges of getting a good history on a veterinary patient is sifting through the large amounts of information that some pet owners provide. In your dog's case, "falling with a loud thud" got my attention. Pepper's history of collapse or "drooping" is probably caused by one of two possibilities: fainting due to heart disease or narcolepsy.

Fainting episodes usually occur when the heart flutters or stops beating for five to eight seconds. When the normal rhythm resumes, an affected dog will behave normally again.

The best way to diagnose an abnormal heart rhythm in a dog is to have them wear a Holter monitor, which records the heart rhythm for 24 hours. When your veterinarian examines your dog, there is good chance that his heart rhythm is normal at the time of the exam. A 24-hour recording will usually confirm any irregular rhythm that could cause fainting. Appropriate medication can be prescribed to minimize or eliminate these episodes.

Narcolepsy is a rare, poorly understood neurologic disease in which a dog will suddenly appear to fall asleep for several seconds at a time, then will awaken as if nothing happened. There is no specific treatment for this problem.

It sounds like Pepper is more prone to his episodes of collapse after he has been outside being more active. This would lead me to a diagnosis of an abnormal heart rhythm. Ask your veterinarian about getting a Holter monitor, and remind him to watch the video.