

Dog Falls and Can't Get Up

A Labrador's trouble walking after play is unnerving.

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Q. I have two black Labs — a male and a female. My female, who is about 3 years old, is having severe problems when she plays. She runs and plays like any other normal dog, then all of a sudden she cannot stand up or even walk. It looks like her legs are broken. She continues to try to get up, but it takes her about a half-hour to do so.

Our vet thinks she might have some kind of vitamin deficiency. Her hips and everything else seem to be fine and were checked by our breeder when we got her. A friend suggested I should have her checked for diabetes. I'd never heard of that before, so I don't know what to research or where to start. Can you tell me what it might be or where to start? It's killing me to see her like this, and it drives her crazy being unable to play outside with the other dogs.

A. I am sorry to hear about your Lab's difficulties. It sounds like a very challenging case. I would like to help you out by at least providing some thoughts for you to discuss with your veterinarian.

First of all, what may seem to be a problem with legs, joints, or hips may turn out to be a completely separate problem. We sometimes see dogs come into our emergency room where owners will say that they seem to be having trouble walking, and it may actually be internal bleeding due to a tumor on the spleen. Initially the approach should be to make a list of possible diagnoses based on your dog's history and clinical signs and then start ruling things out with a thorough physical exam and diagnostic testing.

In the case of your dog, I would have the following list of possibilities based on what you have described: An orthopedic problem such hip dysplasia, a luxated patella (a displaced kneecap), or other joint problem; A heart problem, such as an enlarged heart or valve disease; A neurologic disease causing weakness, or A metabolic problem such as an imbalance of electrolytes in the bloodstream or weakness from a low red blood cell count.

You should not assume her hips are healthy simply because the breeder said they were. Once dogs reach 2 years of age, they can start showing signs of hip dysplasia.

Schedule a visit with a veterinarian as soon as possible. Although extensive blood testing and X-rays can be expensive, most of the rule-outs I have listed above can be eliminated with a thorough physical exam.