

Dogs With Disk Disease

What are the options beyond surgery?

By Shawn Messonnier, DVM

Disk disease is a common problem seen in smaller breeds of dogs especially dachshunds. The intervertebral disk, which functions as a shock absorber between the bones of the spinal column, can protrude and place pressure on the spinal nerves or the spinal cord itself, causing pain and even complete paralysis. While surgery is often recommended for these patients, for variety of reasons some pet owners may elect another treatment. What are the options for pet owners who decline back surgery for their dogs afflicted with disk disease?

1. Medical treatment

Treatment with powerful anti-inflammatory drugs, typically corticosteroids, such as prednisone, may help dogs with disk disease. Response should be seen within several weeks if this therapy is going to work. Additional drugs, including muscle relaxants and analgesics, are often needed as well to keep the pet comfortable.

2. Physical therapy

Physical therapy, including massage, magnetic therapy, swimming, treadmill therapy and other therapies may help your dog regain function of its paralyzed legs. Many months of therapy may be needed before a response is seen.

3. Herbs and homeopathics

Various anti-inflammatory herbs and homeopathic remedies may help dogs if having surgery is not chosen. Herbs, such as white willow bark, and homeopathics, such as arnica and hypericum, have been shown to help relieve pain and inflammation in dogs with traumatic injuries, such as disk disease.

4. Acupuncture

Finally, acupuncture has been shown to be very successful in helping pets with disk disease. Studies have shown that many pets respond to acupuncture, and acupuncture can be as effective as conventional therapies for pets that do not have complete paralysis. In my experience, acupuncture and other natural remedies have helped paralyzed dogs walk again when no other therapy helped.

Although surgery is the ideal treatment and only cure available for many dogs, for a number of owners, it may not be chosen as the therapy for their pets. Before giving up, owners should consider other options including natural remedies. I tell owners that 6 to 12 months of healing time should be given before they determine that the dog will never walk again.