

## Hepatitis Risks for Dogs

**An expert answers your questions about healthcare.**

*Michael Abdella, DVM*

**Q:** In June I lost my beloved Garbo, a 6-year-old Doberman Pinscher, to chronic hepatitis. We tried for six weeks to save her but failed. I have had this breed for 20 years and had never heard of this awful disease. Since then I have heard it is common to the breed. I have been trying to find out more about it. Do you have any additional information?

**A:** The specific syndrome you are referring to is chronic active hepatitis. It is characterized by ongoing inflammatory disease of the liver, resulting in progressive loss of liver tissue and function. It can affect any dog, but a hereditary, familial component appears present in Doberman Pinschers and Cocker Spaniels. The reported ages of onset vary from young adults to geriatric patients, with an average around 6 years old; dogs should have blood-screening tests at six- to 12-month intervals, starting at 2 to 3 years of age. It is estimated at least 60 to 75 percent of the liver needs to be damaged before the disease becomes externally obvious. Unfortunately, this means we do not recognize or treat most cases until damage has already occurred.

We do not know the specific causes of chronic active hepatitis and biopsy is essential in most cases to specifically identify the disease process and determine how advanced the liver changes have become. Treatment includes supportive care, diet changes and suppression of the inflammatory process with immunosuppressive doses of chemotherapy agents.

Early identification and treatment are critical in helping to ensure a positive outcome. Look for: appetite and weight loss

changes in eating habits

changes in urination and drinking

lethargy

vomiting

diarrhea

changes in stool color

poor coat quality

neurologic signs

abdominal distention These signs are not specific for liver disease but are consistent with it. If you spot them, notify your veterinarian.