

Steroid Responsive Meningitis

By Sharon Yard, President, ASTC

[Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy of information. However, this is not a substitute for prompt veterinary care. Any similarity to other publications is unintentional. Published online at Sealyhealthguard.org, 1/29/11]

Recently I have heard of two of our Sealyhams in the US that have been diagnosed with Dog Steroid Responsive Meningitis (DSRM). Since then I have discussed this with the owners of the two dogs, with experts on the subject and have done a lot of research myself on this condition.

The cause of Steroid Responsive Meningitis is unknown. This explains the awkward name currently in use. Some experts think this is an autoimmune disease in which the body makes antibodies against the meninges (the tissues covering the brain and spinal cord). This disease is not caused by a viral or a bacterial infection. It responds well to the use of corticosteroids, so for now, that name seems best.

TREATMENT

It is usually necessary to use corticosteroids daily for a couple of weeks to a month or more to resolve the initial signs. The goals of treatment are suppression of the inflammatory process, recovery of functional neurologic abilities, pain management and seizure prevention or control. Once the patient seems to be back to normal, the dosage of corticosteroids can be tapered off, slowly, to try to keep the illness from recurring. It is not unusual to have to go back to the starting dosage of corticosteroids if a relapse occurs when the corticosteroid is being reduced, at least for a short period of time.

Most dogs with this condition can be weaned completely off steroids after a few months but a few seem to need long term corticosteroid therapy. It is possible that these patients may have a vasculitis disorder affecting the central nervous system or something other than the typical steroid responsive meningitis. The overall prognosis for this condition is usually good, with most dogs either recovering completely or at least having manageable disease. Based on the limited amount known now it does not appear to be genetic.

This is an extremely serious disease which must be caught early if there is to be any hope of complete recovery. It can strike any breed of dog, but some breeds seem to be particularly prone to it: beagles, boxers, German shepherds, Bernese mountain dogs and Nova Scotia duck tolling retrievers. It strikes young dogs and the symptoms are fever, stiff neck, hyper-reactivity to touch and reduced mobility due to marked stiffness. The dog is in excruciating pain and one vet said it's like the worst headache you've ever had.

DIFFICULT TO DIAGNOSE

The reason I'm writing this article about a disease which has such a small occurrence in our Sealyhams is that it's very difficult to diagnose.

Veterinarians who have never seen it before may tend to think the problem is a strained muscle, a herniated disc or a bacterial infection and treat it with antibiotics, muscle relaxers and the like. While this treatment may help somewhat, the meningitis will recur, and in the meantime while the vet is trying to discover exactly what is ailing your dog, he is in agony.

If your dog develops symptoms like the above, mention DSRM to your vet as a possibility. A thorough physical and neurological examination may be required, also blood tests and X-rays. The only sure way to learn if your dog has this disease is to perform a spinal tap, and the only medication that will help relieve his suffering is a course of corticosteroids.

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