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Disc disease in dogs (type II)

The spine of a dog (or person) is made up of a line of block-like bones (vertebrae) with the delicate spinal cord running along the top. The vertebrae are separated by cartilage discs, which act as shock-absorbers.

In older, large breed dogs (including Labradors, German Shepherd Dogs and Dalmatians) the cartilage discs can gradually get stiffer and less flexible. They may then start to move upwards and press on the spinal cord.

What are the signs of type II disc disease?

- Dogs are usually 8 years of age or older.
- The disease can be painful, but it often is not
- The main sign is of gradual, progressive nerve dysfunction

Often, the signs of type II disc disease develop slowly over months. It may begin as a slight scuffing of the nails of the hindlegs, as if the dog is not picking up their feet properly. Over time, this may progress into intermittent knuckling over of the hind paws so that the dog has its toes bent underneath the rest of the foot. In more severe cases, this can progress to a wobbly, 'drunk' gait.

How is type II disc disease diagnosed?



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Type II disc disease is often suspected by the veterinary surgeon on the basis of the above signs. Sometimes an Xray can give a suspicion of the problem - normal discs do not show up on X-rays, but older discs can become calcified and visible on X-rays. However, the only definite test is an MRI scan.

An MRI scan needs to be performed at a specialist centre, under anaesthetic, and costs around £3500-4000.

How is type II disc disease treated?

Treatment involves referral to a specialist for an MRI scan to confirm the diagnosis, followed by surgery to remove the parts of the disc that are pressing on the spinal cord.

Sometimes, if the type II disc disease is not causing any pain and the signs are mild, (especially in an older dog with other illnesses going on), surgery is not the best option. It may be more practical to simply concentrate on assisting your dog to manage with the disc disease.

For example:

- making sure that slippery floors are covered with carpet or other, easy-to-grip surfaces
- keeping walks short,
- possibly using anti-inflammatory medications and physiotherapy to improve signs and help with any other mobility issues (such as arthritis).



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What about German Shepherd Dogs and CDRM?

German Shepherd Dogs have a genetic risk of developing a condition known as CDRM (chronic degenerative radiculomyelopathy). This is a gradual loss of sensation and control over the hind legs, and can look identical to the signs of type II disc disease.

It is good to know if a German Shepherd with these signs has disc disease or CDRM because the disc disease can be treated (with surgery) but the CDRM has no treatment and will just continue to get worse.

For German Shepherd Dogs with these signs, it is a good idea to run a DNA test on a blood sample, to see if the dog has the most common genes for CDRM. If this test comes back positive, it is very likely that the dog has CDRM and it may not be worth booking an MRI scan. If the test comes back negative, it is more likely that the dog has type II disc disease, so referral for an MRI scan to find out for sure is a good idea.

Updated December 2024