



Idiopathic (Geriatric) Vestibular Syndrome

All animals (including humans) have a vestibular system which controls balance and prevents the animal falling over. This balance system consists of sensors deep inside the inner ear, and a specialised control centre at the back of the brain.

What are the signs of idiopathic vestibular syndrome?

Vestibular syndrome occurs when the balance system is damaged in some way. The common signs are loss of balance with falling, rolling over, abnormal flickering of the eyes and general wobbliness. Some dogs are very badly affected and will roll over and over without being able to get up. Other dogs are only mildly affected and may be able to get around without too much difficulty but have their head tilted to one side. Some dogs vomit because they feel so dizzy and unbalanced.

Idiopathic vestibular syndrome tends to occur very suddenly without warning. For this reason owners are often convinced that the dog has had a “stroke”. Strokes are rare in dogs, and when they do occur they tend to cause different symptoms to those described above. However, many clients and vets find it helpful to use the term “stroke” to describe idiopathic vestibular syndrome as the principles of recovery from either condition are similar.

Why does idiopathic vestibular syndrome occur?

We do not know why this occurs. “Idiopathic” means “for no known reason”! It is thought that the nerves connecting the balance sensors in the ear and brain become inflamed but we do not know why this should happen.

There seems to be a link with age as this disease is much more common in older dogs; however young and middle aged animals can also be affected.

How will my vet know what is wrong with my dog?

Your vet may suspect that your dog has idiopathic vestibular syndrome from the characteristic signs resulting from the loss of balance, your description of a sudden onset, and other factors such as your dog's age.

However, there are several other diseases that can cause similar signs, such as middle ear disease, hypothyroidism, trauma, toxicity, meningoencephalitis or tumours. Your vet should carry out a thorough examination of your dog's general physical health and also his/her neurological system. If your pet has other signs that make your vet suspicious of one of these diseases, your vet will offer to arrange further tests (blood tests, X-Rays, MRI scans) to investigate these possibilities.

What is the treatment for idiopathic vestibular syndrome?

Most cases of idiopathic vestibular syndrome improve spontaneously. Although the damage to the vestibular system may be permanent, the brain can learn to compensate for this imbalance. To do this, the brain uses information from the eyes and feet to work out which is the right way up.

Most dogs improve rapidly over the first three days (the abnormal flicking of the eyes usually recovers in this time), and improve further over two to three weeks (the wobbliness and the head tilt usually resolve). However, because the dog's brain is constantly compensating for the balance problem, the symptoms may recur again in the future, especially if the dog is feeling weak or run-down. Again, there is no specific treatment for these recurrences and they should improve with time.

Most treatment is supportive treatment to help the dog cope with the loss of balance and to help the brain compensate. For example:

1. Keep your dog in a quiet room on a comfortable bed with minimal noise and disturbance. However, the room should contain furniture and if possible have a window at ground level. Your dog needs to be able to use his/her vision to see which way is up and so keep his/her balance.
2. Try to avoid carrying the dog, as this will disorientate him/her and make the balance problem worse. Keeping your dog's feet firmly on the ground with its eyes on the horizon is the best way of helping the brain to compensate for the balance problem. Encourage your dog to walk about under close supervision.
3. Many dogs will not eat or drink unless they are hand fed during the first few days of dizziness. They may also need assistance to go out to the toilet. In some cases it is easier for the dog to be hospitalised so that this care can be given at the veterinary surgery.
4. Anti-sickness and travel sickness medications may help reduce feelings of nausea and dizziness.
5. Some other medications, such as steroids (usually Prednisolone) and a drug known as Vivitonin have been suggested for this condition. There is no published evidence that dogs on these medications recover any faster or any more completely than dogs who do not receive them. However, many vets have found

these treatments to be helpful in the past, and there may be other benefits, e.g. prednisolone can help with arthritic pain and loss of appetite; Vivitoinin is licensed to improve sprightliness in older dogs.

6. If the vestibular syndrome does not improve as expected your vet will repeat the thorough examination to check that the diagnosis is correct. Blood tests, scans or treatment trials may be suggested to look for other conditions as described earlier.

Prognosis

Most dogs make a good recovery. Sometimes dogs are left with a slight head tilt to one side, or are more clumsy than they used to be. It is advised that dogs that have had idiopathic vestibular syndrome are not allowed to go swimming any more. This is because they are constantly relying on the information from their feet to remind their brain which way is up so that they can keep their balance. If they start to swim they can become very disorientated and may need to be rescued from the water!