



Hypothyroidism

Hypothyroidism is the most common endocrine (hormonal) disease in dogs. Breeds that are more commonly affected are the Golden Retriever, Doberman Pincher, Boxer, Irish Setter, Airedale, Great Dane, Miniature Schnauzer, Old English Sheepdog, Shetland Sheepdog, Poodle and Dachshund. The Disease is usually diagnosed in middle aged dogs, (2-9 years). It is very rarely diagnosed in cats.

The thyroid gland is located in the neck on each side of the trachea. It receives signals from the brain to produce and release thyroid hormone. The thyroid hormone then travels around the body in the bloodstream and affects virtually every organ. The hormones overall effect is to control the rate of metabolism. Since the effects of thyroid hormone are so widespread there is no single symptom or sign that means an animal is hypothyroid (lacking thyroid hormone). The symptoms tend to be vague and come on slowly. What happens to the thyroid gland to make it stop functioning in the first place is usually not determined. Most cases are simply an unexplained "shutdown" or because it was attacked by the animal's own immune system and as a result stops functioning.

There are, however, changes in some parts of the body that can tip us off to a possible thyroid problem. General symptoms can be obesity that is resistant to weight loss despite appropriate diet, lethargy, exercise intolerance, weakness, and a tendency to seek out warm places. Changes seen in the skin and haircoat can also be seen. These changes include hair loss, dull or brittle haircoat, seborrhea, chronic skin and/or ear infections and increased pigmentation.

The reproductive system can be affected and result in infertility, abnormal estrous cycles in females, abortion, weak or stillborn puppies, and decreased libido in males. Hypothyroid dogs also tend to have slower than normal heart rates. Other symptoms can involve the nervous system or the eyes, but are less common.

Diagnosis of hypothyroidism is made based on the clinical signs, breed involved and blood tests. Blood tests, unfortunately, are not straight forward. The type of blood tests will depend on any other on-going illness and the severity of the clinical signs. Sometimes, more than one test will be needed if the first test is in the "gray zone."

Improvement in the dogs symptoms can be seen as soon as 2 weeks (activity level) and take as long as several months. Hair coat changes frequently get worse before they get better (getting rid of the old, making room for the new).

It is important to monitor the dog's hormone level once on thyroid supplementation. Giving a dog too much replacement hormone has detrimental effects and giving too little may not alleviate the symptoms. Periodic blood tests may be needed early in the course of treatment until the right dose has been established. For some dogs this will require only a single test and others may require several.

Hypothyroidism is an important disease because it affects the overall quality of life of the dog. Many people don't realize how much their dog is affected until they start the supplementation and see the positive changes occur. Treatment for hypothyroidism is usually successful and dogs go on to live happier and more comfortable lives.