

Doggy dementia or just getting old?

As dogs age, their brains age too and owners may see behavioural signs similar to human dementia, where there is a progressive decline in cognition. In dogs, this is known as Canine Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CCDS).

CCDS is a neurobehavioural syndrome where there are disruptions to learning, memory, spatial awareness, social interactions and sleeping patterns.

When older pets start to have toileting accidents indoors, become disoriented, more vocal, less tolerant of being handled or less interactive, owners may presume that it is just a normal part of becoming old and that nothing can be done. Owners may not immediately organise a veterinary consultation to seek help for these types of problems and meanwhile, the quality of life for the pet deteriorates. Eventually, the owner may decide to euthanase the pet.

It is important that as your pet starts to age, that the frequency of vet examinations increases to at least twice yearly. Medical problems such as osteoarthritis, incontinence, blindness, chronic pain, dental disease, blood pressure abnormalities and mental impairment occur more frequently in senior pets.

DIAGNOSIS OF CCDS

Before a diagnosis of CCDS can be made, it is important to rule out other medical problems by carrying out the following:

- Physical examination by your vet including eye exam, dental exam, heart auscultation and joint palpation

- Blood and urine testing
- Blood pressure check
- Imaging may be recommended (radiographs, ultrasound)

Once these tests have been carried out, a diagnosis can be made if there is no other disease to explain the clinical signs.

CLINICAL SIGNS OF CCDS

- Disorientation
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Reduced activity level
- Change in sleeping patterns
- Excessive panting
- Reduced appetite
- Inappropriate defecation and/ or urination
- Reduced self-grooming
- Increased vocalisation
- Forgetting familiar people
- Pacing aimlessly
- Inability to navigate in a normally familiar environment

TREATMENT OF CCDS

There is no actual cure, but doggy dementia can be improved with medication as well as addressing any underlying medical problems the pet may have. This may include pain relief for osteoarthritis, treating any significant dental disease to ensure the dog does not have chronic dental pain and addressing any blood pressure or metabolic problems.

1) Medication

Propentofylline (Vivitonin)

has proved effective in the treatment of some cases of dementia. It is worthwhile discussing it with your vet to see if a treatment trial can be arranged. It works by increasing the blood supply to the brain, enhancing cognitive function, improving learning and memory problems and increasing activity levels.

There are some other medications that are not registered for use in dogs that can be helpful too, such as selegiline hydrochloride (Anipryl). This drug is used in human medicine for the treatment of early-stage Parkinson's disease, depression and senile dementia. Speak to your vet about the best options.

2) Nutrition

A well-balanced premium quality diet is important for senior pets. There is also the option of a prescription diet, available from your veterinarian, called Hill's Science Diet B/D (brain diet). This can improve cognitive function via supplements of a wide range of anti-oxidants, which promote the recovery of damaged neurons in the brain.

3) Environment

Living with an elderly dog can be a real challenge. Dogs with CCDS tend to do better when they have a regular routine including meal times, playtime, exercise and basic training. Sticking to a stable daily routine can help reduce anxiety in older pets.

A few tips for managing your senior pet

- Older dogs tend to get nuclear sclerosis (a cloudy appearance to their eyes) that can lead to night blindness. Providing a night-light can help him or her get around more confidently.
 - Provide a couple of different water sources in case your dog forgets where the water bowl is kept.
 - Provide non-slip surfaces to improve your dog's confidence walking around the house, or even a ramp so they can avoid the stairs.
 - Baby gates can prevent your dog from accessing areas that may be unsafe, such as steep staircases.
 - An Adaptil diffuser plugged in near your pet's bed can help reduce anxiety. This is a synthetic analogue of the pheromone that is produced by a bitch to help her puppies relax after birth. It is also available as a collar or a spray.
- For further information about doggy dementia in older pets, visit www.maturedogs.com.



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