



Vestibular Disease in Dogs

Dogs are known as man's best friend. They are cuddly, playful and have endless energy. But if your dog is showing signs of imbalance and disorientation, they might be suffering from vestibular disease.

What is vestibular disease?

Vestibular disease affects the cranial nerves responsible for balance and orientation in space. It is a very common presentation in old dogs and so as a result is often referred to as geriatric vestibular disease. Owners often present their dog as an emergency mistakenly thinking they have had a stroke as the dog usually comes in leaning to one side or lying on one side unable to get up. While the signs of vestibular disease are extremely disturbing to an owner, the disease looks a lot worse than it is and many dogs make a complete recovery. A stroke is a vascular accident in the brain and while this can cause vestibular disease, it is a rare cause in dogs.

Signs of vestibular disease:

- Disorientation
- Head tilt or falling towards one side
- Nystagmus (rapid eye movement)
- Rolling on the ground in severe cases
- Motion sickness (vomiting and nausea)

Can a dog recover from vestibular disease?

Whether a dog will recover depends on whether there is a central (brain) problem, a middle ear infection or if the cause is idiopathic (unknown). In most cases, the cause is idiopathic in old dogs, which carries a good prognosis. Middle ear infections can also cause vestibular disease as the vestibulocochlear nerve runs through the middle ear and if there is an infection present, balance can be affected.

What testing does a dog with vestibular disease need?

The prognosis is extremely variable for the different causes of vestibular disease and there are several important tests that should be carried out in dogs presenting with these signs:

- Full physical examination and patient history
- Examination of the external ear canals with an otoscope to check for signs of ear disease
- Neurological examination to check if any other cranial nerves are affected (more common in central brain causes of vestibular disease)

- Radiography of the tympanic bullae if the vet is suspicious of middle ear disease

- Brain scan if the vet is suspicious of a brain tumour
- I like to radiograph the lungs of dogs where a brain tumour is suspected as this is often the first place a tumour will spread to and it is a lot less complicated to get an x-ray of the lungs compared with a brain scan, which is often not possible due to the expense.

Is there any treatment available?

It is a good idea to provide the dog with some anti-nausea medication to reduce the incidence of vomiting and improve the well-being of the dog. Sometimes sedation and hospitalisation is required if your dog is distressed and anxious due to the sudden onset of symptoms.

While most cases of vestibular disease are idiopathic (no known cause) and have a good prognosis, the nursing care involved can be quite extensive, particularly if your dog cannot walk or eat by itself due to the lack of coordination.

Cases must be assessed individually with respect to several factors:

- Mobility issues (is the dog able to go to the toilet?)
- Level of distress (is the dog really stressed out as a result of the disorientation?)
- Feeding issues (some need hand-feeding)
- Ability of the owner to provide nursing care at home (time off work)
- Concurrent problems such as arthritis, obesity, blindness which may affect speed of recovery

While some cases of vestibular disease are very mild and improve in 24-48 hrs, other more severe cases can take several weeks to stabilise and many dogs will always have a slight head tilt for life. Every case is different and management needs to take the individual dog and owner's situation into account.



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