

Hypothyroidism in Dogs

The thyroid gland is one of the most important glands in the body. It is located in the neck near the trachea and is composed of two lobes, one on each side of the trachea (windpipe). The thyroid gland regulates the rate of metabolism. If it is hyperfunctional, metabolism speeds up. If it is less functional than normal, metabolism slows down.

Causes

Hypothyroidism is almost always caused by either an immune-mediated attack on the thyroid or atrophy where the normal thyroid tissue is replaced by fat tissue in what is considered a degenerative disease.

These two causes of hypothyroidism account for more than 95% of the cases. The other five percent are due to uncommon diseases, including cancer of the thyroid gland.

Clinical Signs

When the rate of metabolism slows down, virtually every organ in the body is affected in some manner. Most affected dogs have one or more of several “typical” physical and/or chemical abnormalities. These include:

- Weight gain without an increase in appetite
- Lethargy and lack of desire to exercise
- Cold intolerance (gets cold easily)
- Dry haircoat with excessive shedding
- Very thin haircoat to near baldness
- Increased pigmentation in the skin
- Increased susceptibility to skin and ear infections
- Failure to regrow hair after clipping or shaving
- High blood cholesterol

Some dogs also have other abnormalities that are not the typical findings. These include:

- Thickening of the facial skin so they have a “tragic facial expression”
- Abnormal function of nerves causing non-painful lameness, dragging of feet, incoordination, and a head tilt
- Loss of libido and infertility in intact males
- Lack of heat periods, infertility, and abortion in females
- Fat deposits in the corneas of the eyes
- Keratoconjunctivitis sicca (“dry eye” due to very thick tears)

Diagnosis

The most common test is for the T4 level. This is a measurement of the main thyroid hormone in a blood sample. Occasionally, the T4 level can be misleading but if hypothyroidism is suspected but the T4 is normal, other tests can be performed. These are more expensive so they are not used as first line tests.

Treatment

Hypothyroidism is treatable but not curable. It is treated with oral administration of a thyroid replacement hormone. This drug must be given for the rest of the dog’s life.

There is a standard dose that is used initially; it is based on the dog’s weight. However, after about one month of treatment, further testing is done to verify that the thyroid hormone levels are normal. In some dogs, the dose will need to be further adjusted every 6-12 months.

Overdosing of Thyroid Medication

Signs of hyperthyroidism can be caused. These include hyperactivity, lack of sleep, weight loss, and an increase in water consumption. If any of these occur, notify us so that a proper adjustment can be made.