I know people who have had “slipped” discs or have “blown out” discs in their backs causing major problems. Can dogs have this problem too?

Yes, in particular short-legged dogs with long bodies, such as dachshunds, Pekingese, beagles, miniature and toy poodles, cocker spaniels, Shih tzus, Lhasa apsos, and Welsh corgis, are prone to have problems with the discs in their backs and sometimes in their necks. This is called intervertebral disc disease.

Dogs and people have discs between vertebrae in the spinal column. These discs act as a cushion, providing flexibility and shock absorption during motion.

In breeds prone to disc problems, these discs age prematurely may predispose dogs to future back and neck problems.

To understand disc disease in simple terms, think of the disc as a jelly donut. The outer dough provides structure while the inside has a gel-like consistency. As the donut becomes stale, its outer portion dries out and becomes brittle. Any impact to the donut will cause the inner jelly to squirt out (herniate) thru the compromised shell. This is essentially what happens with disc herniation in small dogs. Unfortunately for dogs, the inner disc material (nucleus) herniates in the direction of the spinal cord, potentially causing serious injury.

How do you know if your dog is affected with this problem? Some dogs show subtle early signs like nebulous pain and others are unable to walk. The typical situation is best illustrated with the “poster child” of the disease, the dachshund.

A typical report from the dog’s owner is that their four-year old dachshund took a big leap off of the couch when the mailman arrived. He hesitated to go outside to use the bathroom initially and even appeared lame. Now, the next day he is dragging his back legs.

This dachshund likely ruptured a disc when he jumped off the couch. The ruptured disc material compressed the spinal cord causing progressive problems until the dog could no longer walk. It is time to see the veterinarian.

Once evaluated by a veterinarian, a long-term prognosis can be better discussed. Dogs that are still walking but are wobbly can sometimes benefit from strict cage rest alone. Upon reevaluation by your veterinarian, if he is back to normal, activity can return to normal.

The other option, often appropriate for the dog that is not walking, is surgery. This requires a series of diagnostic tests performed under anesthesia, including x-rays of the back, a myelogram (dye put in the fluid that bathes the spinal cord), and a CT scan. All of these tests help the surgeon to have the most successful surgical outcome.

At surgery, a portion of vertebral bone is removed in order to visualize the spinal cord and the herniated disc material is then removed. Recovery can be short or long (days to months)

depending on the severity of the injury to the spinal cord. The earlier that veterinary attention is sought by the owner the better the chances are for a full recovery.

In order to minimize chances of disc problems, keep your dog fit, don’t allow jumping off couches and beds, and use a harness instead of a standard collar. In addition, a dog which has had a clinical episode of disc disease may be a candidate for laser disc ablation surgery. This is a relatively new procedure in veterinary medicine and consists of using a laser to remove diseased disc material, and in this way, can serve as a very good preventative procedure. The OSU Veterinary Hospital is one of only a few veterinary centers in the country that provides this service. Your veterinarian can call OSU for more information about this procedure and our surgeons would be glad be assist them.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

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