The gradual onset of kidney failure is a common problem in dogs and cats, especially as they age. Although there are many causes of declining kidney function, frequently no single reason for loss of function can be identified in older pets. For most aging pets the course of kidney failure is slowly progressive, and failure frequently advances more quickly in dogs than cats.

The signs of chronic kidney failure (CKF) vary with the stage of disease and may be subtle or intermittent in the early stages. Most of the symptoms of CKF can be associated with many other diseases as well.

Excessive drinking and urination are among the most common signs of failing kidneys. Affected pets often need to make more trips outside or to the litter box to urinate, may have accidents in the house, and generally produce larger amounts of urine than usual.

Pets with CKF frequently have a decrease in appetite and become more selective about what they will eat. Weight loss may be seen and vomiting or diarrhea may occur at least periodically.

The pet may also become less active and develop a poor hair coat that has lost its sheen. Since many of these symptoms are signs which pet owners frequently attribute to aging, their appearance may not be a cause of concern for owners initially.

The diagnosis of CKF is usually made by the pet owner's veterinarian through a combination of appropriate history, physical examination findings, and diagnostic procedures such as blood tests and radiographs (X-rays) or ultrasound.

Although CKF is incurable, the pet's veterinarian can often make treatment recommendations which will slow down the progression of disease and improve the pet’s quality of life.

These recommendations frequently include administering medications and fluids, making diet changes, and monitoring the condition of the pet through periodic check-ups.

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

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