

I have an eight month old schnoodle (schnauzer and toy poodle mix). She is very active and loves to run and chase squirrels. Sometimes when she is running I see her lift one of her hind legs and for a few seconds she keeps running on three legs until that foot comes back down on the ground. I never see a problem like this when she is walking. What could be going on?

Of course there are many reasons why a dog would have a problem with a hind leg. Injury to a ligament or bone could be involved, or an infection such as Lyme disease affecting a joint. Since she is such a young dog, we have to also consider a congenital abnormality. Some congenital skeletal disorders are more likely in large breeds of dogs, some in small breeds. In her case the most likely explanation is a problem is in the knee joint of the leg she is holding up. The patella (knee cap) should slide up and down in a groove in front of the femur (thigh bone) as the leg is flexed and extended. A fairly common defect in small breeds of dogs is a medially luxating (dislocating) patella. In these dogs the groove in the bone is too shallow or the attachments of the tendons that keep the patella in place are not normal. With either cause, the patella can shift out of its normal location in the groove and move toward the inside of the leg. In 50% of dogs with this problem, both knees are abnormal.

If your veterinarian diagnoses her with a medially luxating patella, find out what grade it is. There are four grades in terms of severity. Grade one is the least serious where the patella can be pushed out of the groove but pops back in on its own. Grade four is the most debilitating where the patella is permanently luxated and the leg can't be extended. These dogs will walk with their hind legs bent and look bow-legged.

Treatment for your dog will depend on the grade of luxation and how it is affecting her. Mildly affected dogs may only need their exercise restricted. Severely affected dogs may need surgery to keep the patella in its proper location. Other considerations to slow the inevitable process of arthritis in the joint are making sure your dog is not overweight and the use of glucosamine/chondroitin supplements.

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