

My veterinarian thinks my dog may have degenerative myelopathy and told me it is only going to get worse. Is there anything I can do to slow down the process?

Degenerative myelopathy (DM) is a genetic disease in dogs that causes gradual loss of effective nerve conduction from the spinal cord to the muscles. It is generally found in middle-aged to older dogs. Originally, this was thought to affect mainly German Shepherd dogs, but has been diagnosed in many other breeds. Has your dog had a blood test to confirm this diagnosis? Prior to 2009, we weren't sure of the cause, perhaps nutritional or immune-related, but now a specific genetic defect has been discovered. There is a fairly reliable DNA test that can identify dogs with two normal genes, carriers with one normal gene and one mutation, and affected dogs who have 2 mutated genes. The symptoms of weakness in the hind end, loss of coordination, stumbling and falling can mimic several other treatable neurologic diseases affecting the spinal cord so it is best to obtain a diagnosis.

The progression of the disease is similar to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis in people, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Over a period of months, a dog with DM will become weaker in his hind end, dragging or shuffling his paws and losing muscle mass in the legs. Some dogs will become incontinent, and with time, some will show weakness in the front legs also. Although a dog may appear anxious when having trouble getting up, we do not believe this is a painful disease.

If your dog does in fact have degenerative myelopathy, studies have shown that you can slow the progression of this devastating disease by making sure your dog continues to get exercise. If you have access to a pool or canine fitness center, swimming is a great option. Be sure he wears a floatation device for safety. Walking is also a great way to try to build up and maintain muscle and help him to keep his joints limber. If he needs help walking, you can help support him with the use of a sling under his belly. Many dogs with DM also have hip dysplasia or arthritis and any treatment to help with those conditions such as weight loss, joint protective supplements, omega 3 fatty acids and laser therapy will also improve his overall ability to move.

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