Canine Pancreatitis

What is Canine Pancreatitis?

Canine pancreatitis is inflammation of the pancreas in dogs which can be very painful and requires veterinary attention. There are two main types of pancreatitis in dogs; acute and chronic. Chronic pancreatitis is usually milder in nature and has more of a waxing and waning presentation where signs can be present over a long time. Acute pancreatitis often has a more severe and quick onset presentation and can be more life-threatening in nature. In Cocker Spaniels there is thought to be an auto-immune cause.

Why does it happen?

The cause of pancreatitis in dogs is not fully understood but there are numerous risk factors that can increase the risk of a dog developing the disease. Often pancreatitis is diagnosed as “idiopathic” meaning that there is no known underlying cause. The main risk factor is thought to be dietary (particularly high fat diets). Other factors thought to increase the risk include some medication, general anaesthesia, surgery and infection.

What are the clinical signs?

Pancreatitis starts in dogs with signs such as vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal pain. Signs that your dog is suffering from abdominal pain would include an arched-back appearance, and sometimes they adopt a “praying position” where they lean on their forelimbs (similar to when they have a stretch when they yawn). Other signs that are commonly seen are non-specific such as lethargy, weakness and depression. When your dog is feeling unwell, it may well also have a reduced appetite.

How is it diagnosed?

Canine pancreatitis is a very difficult condition to diagnose. A vet may have suspicions of pancreatitis based on your dogs’ clinical signs and findings on a physical exam but further tests will be needed to help diagnosis. Routine blood work may be helpful when investigating pancreatitis; however there is no test available that is 100% diagnostic. Imaging such as x-rays and ultrasound may be helpful to support a diagnosis and may be important to rule out other causes for your dogs clinical signs (such as an intestinal obstruction). There is a blood test (called canine pancreatic lipase) that measures the levels of an enzyme that is secreted from the pancreas; in some dogs with pancreatitis this enzyme is elevated. However, a normal pancreatic lipase result does not rule out pancreatitis as a diagnosis.

What is the treatment/management?

There is no specific treatment for pancreatitis. Mostly treatment is supportive. Treatment will vary depending on the specific case and your vet will decide the best treatment options for your dog.
Fluid therapy

In dogs that have not been eating/drinking, they are at risk of becoming dehydrated. Patients that present dehydrated are often hospitalised and put on a drip. Dogs don’t usually find this very stressful and often tolerate it well as once they are set-up they can be left to settle comfortably in a kennel.

Pain relief

As pancreatitis is a painful condition it is important that pain relief is prescribed. Whilst hospitalised, your dog may receive pain relief via injections. When comfortable, eating and ready to go home, your dog may be changed to oral tablets.

Diet

These patients should be encouraged to eat. Diet fed should be low in fat and it is important that no treats that are potentially high in fat are given that could worsen the pancreatitis. We only restrict food if the patient is continuing to vomit.

Anti-sickness medications

As vomiting is a clinical sign of the disease, it is sometimes necessary to give your dog injections or tablets to reduce nausea.

Gastroprotectants

In some cases, your vet may prescribe medication to reduce stomach acid production. This may help your dog feel more comfortable.

Antibiotics

In some cases, your vet may prescribe antibiotics however these are not always necessary.

What is the prognosis?

The prognosis varies depending on the severity of pancreatitis. Chronic long term milder cases may have a good prognosis, but there is a risk of disease recurring. Acute cases with complications and systemic signs can have a worse prognosis. So outlook depends on the case and your vet should be able to give you an idea of likely prognosis. It is important that dogs suffering from pancreatitis are maintained on a low fat diet long term so as to reduce the risk of recurrent episodes. Owners should also monitor for recurrence of the clinical signs and bring back in for re-examinations if concerned.