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Common Health Problems of Senior Dogs

Improvements in nutrition and veterinary care have led to our canine pets living longer lives. Although age is not a disease process per say, certain diseases are more common in older dogs. Diseases that are more commonly encountered are obesity, arthritis, dental disease, cancer, diabetes, kidney disease, and heart disease. These diseases will be briefly discussed in this review.

Obesity

Obesity is defined as body weight exceeding ideal by at least 20% or development of health problems due to accumulation of excess body fat. The incidence of obesity in humans has significantly increased and is approaching 40% in the United States. Obesity is increasing in pet dogs and is most commonly seen in senior dogs. Obesity in Labrador retrievers has been demonstrated to result in a significantly shorter lifespan when compared to leaner counterparts. Obesity has been associated with orthopedic diseases, elevated triglycerides in blood, diabetes, urinary incontinence, and respiratory problems in dogs. Increased incidence of cancer may also be associated with obesity in dogs.

Older dogs are less active and have lower caloric requirements. Ideally, senior dogs should either be fed smaller amounts or changed to a lower calorie diet to prevent obesity from developing. Once obesity has occurred, changing to a lower calorie diet and gradually increasing activity together is most effective in promoting weight loss. Working with your veterinarian to provide specific dietary and exercise guidelines can be helpful in reversing obesity. Veterinarians may prescribe Slentrol, a medication that acts to decrease intestinal fat absorption and decrease appetite, to promote weight loss. The goal should be to achieve ideal body weight over a 4 to 6 month period. Monitoring body weight on a weekly or biweekly basis is vital to document progress.

Arthritis

Arthritis is commonly seen in older dogs. Arthritis may develop secondary to other orthopedic diseases such as an anterior cruciate ligament rupture. In many dogs however, there is no underlying joint disease or injury to cause the problem. While arthritis is not life threatening, it adversely affects quality of life.

Management of arthritis is best accomplished by using a staged multimodality approach. Weight loss if the animal is overweight can be very helpful. Veterinary physical therapists are helpful in promoting non-weight bearing exercises such as swimming and underwater treadmill training. Acupuncture can be very helpful in managing arthritis. Effectiveness of glucosamine in dogs as in humans is controversial. Some dogs may show improved comfort with glucosamine chondroitin sulfate therapy. There are a variety of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID's) that have been developed for dogs that can be very helpful in alleviating arthritis-associated pain. While these medications are much safer than aspirin, they should only be given under the direction of a veterinarian. NSAID's are contraindicated if concurrent kidney disease is present. Adverse side effects associated with NSAID's in dogs include vomiting, GI ulceration, and liver disorders. Dogs who cannot receive NSAID's can be managed with alternative pain relieving medications such as tramadol and gabapentin. Newer therapies such as intra-articular platelet rich plasma have shown promise in the treatment of arthritis. Finally, total hip replacement surgery can be utilized as a last resort for severe hip arthritis, which cannot be managed by other methods.

Dental Disease

Dental disease is very common in senior pets. Signs of dental disease include odor to breath, inflamed or bleeding gums, visible dental tartar, and less commonly decreased appetite. Daily tooth brushing and regular dental cleanings are very helpful in preventing periodontal disease and tooth loss. Your veterinarian can also prescribe specific dental chew treats and prescription diets that are helpful in preventing dental disease. Veterinary dental specialist can offer root canals as an alternative to tooth extraction in some cases.

Cancer

Cancer is more commonly encountered in senior pets. Since cancer can affect any of the dog's organ systems, a wide variety of signs including poor appetite, weight loss, lethargy, difficulty urinating or defecating, skin masses or sores, vomiting, diarrhea, difficulty breathing or cough, seizures, and sneezing especially with one sided nasal bleeding. All skin and subcutaneous masses should be pointed out to your veterinarian so that they can be aspirated to determine the underlying cause and documented in the medical record. Regular six-month checkups are helpful in diagnosing cancer early in senior patients. As in people, cancer if diagnosed at an early stage is easier to treat. Treatment of cancer in pets has progressed significantly in the past 30 years. Specific treatment modalities for cancer in dogs include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and immunotherapy.

Diabetes

Senior pets have been demonstrated to be at increased risk for developing diabetes. Obesity and a previous diagnosis of hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing's Disease) have also been shown to be risk factors for developing diabetes mellitus. Diabetes is more common in female dogs. Diabetic dogs frequently present for increased thirst, increased urine volume, and weight loss. Some diabetic dogs may develop ketoacidosis that can results in poor appetite, vomiting, and lethargy. Diabetes is diagnosed by documenting elevated blood glucose and the presence of glucose and if ketoacidosis is present, ketones in urine. Diabetic ketoacidosis is a life threatening disease and affected dogs require hospitalization for IV fluids, intensive monitoring, and aggressive insulin therapy.

Management of diabetes in dogs requires twice daily insulin injections and is best managed by feeding two equal lower carbohydrate meals each day. Intact female dogs are difficult to regulate and should be spayed. Even diabetic dogs that are well regulated are predisposed to developing cataracts. Cataract surgery can restore vision to these dogs.

Kidney Disease

Kidney disease is common in senior dogs. Signs of kidney disease include increased thirst, increased urine volume, decreased appetite, vomiting, odor to breath, and oral ulceration. Kidney disease is more successfully managed if discovered early. Performing lab work (CBC, serum chemistries, and urinalysis) ideally every 6 months but even annually is helpful in diagnosing kidney disease at an early stage. Laboratory signs of kidney disease include elevations of BUN, creatinine, and phosphorus in blood; dilute urine specific gravity, elevated protein in urine, and anemia. Urinalysis and urine culture are indicated in kidney disease to detect any underlying urinary tract infection. Abdominal ultrasound is helpful in assessing kidney architecture and screening the urinary system for stones and masses. Prescription kidney diets that are lower in protein, phosphorus, and sodium are helpful in managing kidney disease. When changing to a prescription kidney diet, the new diet is better accepted if the change is made gradually over a 7 to 10 day period. There are many different prescription kidney diets available for dogs and if your dog will not accept the first prescription diet, a different prescription diet should be tried. Some dogs who refuse prescription diets will accept homemade kidney diets. Your veterinarian can provide you with recipes. Dogs with more severe kidney disease may require initial hospitalization for IV fluid therapy. High blood pressure can be seen with kidney disease and should be treated to prevent a more rapid progression of kidney disease. Dogs with excess protein in their urine can benefit from treatment with benazepril or another ACE inhibitor to help slow the progression of kidney disease. If diagnosed early, many dogs with kidney disease can be successfully managed for years.

Heart Disease

Small breed senior dogs are at increased risk for developing mitral regurgitation. In mitral regurgitation, nodular degeneration of the mitral valve leads to leaking of blood from the left ventricle through the mitral valve and into the left atrium. Over time enlargement of the left atrium and ventricle occur. In more severe cases, left sided congestive heart failure can occur and fluid can develop in the lungs. Signs of congestive heart failure include cough, shortness or breath, and decreased stamina. Chest radiographs and echocardiogram are used to diagnose mitral regurgitation and differentiate this condition from chronic airway disease and collapsing trachea, which can also be seen in toy and miniature poodles. Diuretics, vasodilators, and ionotropic drugs are used to manage heart disease in dogs. Many dogs with mitral regurgitation can live for years with a good quality of life.