

Degenerative Myelopathy

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Degenerative Myelopathy (DM) is a progressive deterioration of the spinal cord. It is seen in all large breed dogs, most frequently in the German Shepherd. Since it is a progressive disease, the onset usually occurs in dogs over the age of five. The most common presentation is a dog that has slowly progressing rear limb weakness or paralysis with no overt pain. Over time the dog will become weaker and begin to drag her/his feet and exhibit a loss of coordination. Lastly, the dog will develop fecal and urinary incontinence, rear limb paralysis, and even front limb weakness or paralysis. Often these dogs will also have a history of arthritis in the hips or back that can cause discomfort, but this is not associated with DM.

The diagnosis of DM is made with a combination of physical examination, radiology, laboratory diagnostics, and history. Dogs will have a history of progressive weakness and ataxia (wobbly gait), coupled with muscle atrophy (reduction in muscle mass). Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) analysis usually shows an increase in protein. An MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) or myelogram will need to be done to rule out other conditions such as intervertebral disc disease or neoplasia (cancer).

Recent studies have shown a possible connection between DM and an immune mediated process. It is hoped that with more research, an antigen will be found that can help detect DM earlier with a blood test.

While there is no proven effective treatment for DM, exercise is important to retaining muscle mass and tone. Many dogs will already have muscle atrophy, so it is important to gradually increase their activity level. The exercise should consist of regular, continuous 'work-outs' to help build muscle tone, not just running in the backyard.

DM progresses at different rates in each animal, but as there is no effective treatment, prognosis is guarded.

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