

Points on Pets: Dog's mortality tough to live with

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: We are really worried about our 15-year-old, medium-sized, mixed breed spayed dog because she has lost most of her stamina and her zest for life. She cannot walk very far without coughing and lying down. She coughs often and does not seem to be able to get comfortable even while resting on her favorite doggy mat. Is she going to have a heart attack and die? We do not know how we are going to cope with not having our precious, four-footed friend.

A: As you know, it is very difficult to watch our four-footed companions grow old and become incapacitated due to their failing bodies. Even though this is part of accepting the responsibility of owning a pet, most of us never seem prepared emotionally to deal with this.

Although it is impossible to tell you whether or not your dog is going to have a heart attack and die, it is likely that she is suffering due to chronic congestive heart failure. The hearts of dogs with chronic congestive heart failure are unable to pump blood throughout their bodies efficiently. The most common reason for this is that the valves between the chambers of the heart are no longer able to close adequately. Whenever this happens, the heart tries to compensate by becoming enlarged and pumping faster.

Other organs within the dog with congestive heart failure also try to compensate. Increased salt and fluids are often retained. This, in turn, causes fluid accumulation throughout the entire body including the lungs. Fluid in the lungs causes the affected dog to cough often and become extremely anxious and uncomfortable. Because the fluid is deep within the lungs it cannot be removed by simply coughing.

Most veterinarians treat dogs with congestive heart failure with drugs to strengthen the contractions of the heart, diuretics to reduce the amount of fluid retention throughout the body, salt-free diets and exercise restriction. While all of these treatments usually decrease the frequency of coughing and allow the dog to be more comfortable, the long-term prognosis is not very good. Recovery usually does not occur and the old dog eventually dies due to heart failure.

Your veterinarian can give you the best advice regarding how to make your dog comfortable during her final days. Your veterinarian can also help you find appropriate counseling or a support group to help you cope with the loss of your longtime companion.

Q: We are in the midst of football season and shortening days. Unfortunately, this means that my husband and his friends will be spending more time in front of our big screen television drinking beer. Every year I worry that my little dog is going to drink leftover beer out of one of the guy's cups. Other than making her drunk, will this greatly harm her?

A: It is a great understatement to say that pets should be prevented from consuming beer and other alcoholic beverages. Ingesting alcoholic beverages can cause pets to become intoxicated which can lead to a coma and death very quickly. Giving pets alcoholic beverages intentionally is considered animal abuse in some jurisdictions and can result in substantial fines for those who are responsible. You should not allow your dog to drink out of the cups your husband and his friends leave after the game.

Send e-mail to copleysd@copleynews.com or write to Pets, P.O. Box 120190, San Diego, CA 92112-0190. Only questions of general interest will be answered in this column.

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