

Points on Pets: Addison's disease adds vague symptoms

by R.G. Elmore, D.V.M.

Q: Our veterinarian recently diagnosed Addison's disease in our 8-year-old, spayed West Highland white terrier. Our dog was not doing well for several months. We took her to several veterinarians who simply treated her symptoms before receiving a definite diagnosis from our current veterinarian. Being persistent and willing to obtain second and third opinions has paid off for our precious canine.

Is Addison's disease common in dogs?

A: It was thought that Addison's disease, also known as hypoadrenocorticism, was rare in dogs; however, because the signs of the disease are vague and similar to those seen in other common diseases, many cases might have been misdiagnosed. It is also possible that many veterinarians did not routinely test for Addison's disease when signs pointed to other ailments.

As already stated, the signs of Addison's disease are often vague - gradual loss of appetite, lethargy, vomiting, diarrhea, weight loss, dullness and dehydration. These symptoms are also seen in dogs with other diseases, such as kidney failure and digestive tract abnormalities. The diagnosis of Addison's disease is usually based on the history of the abnormal signs, a thorough physical examination and laboratory tests.

Addison's disease occurs when the portion of the adrenal glands called the cortices are destroyed. Since the cortices of the adrenal glands normally secrete glucocorticoids (cortisone) and mineralocorticoids (aldosterone), treatment usually includes daily replacement therapy of these hormones. Although Addison's disease can be a serious disease in dogs if left untreated, it can usually be successfully treated if diagnosed early during its occurrence.

Although Addison's disease can be found in dogs of any age or breed, it is most often seen in middle-aged, female dogs. The breeds most often affected are Great Danes, Portuguese water dogs, standard poodles, West Highland white terriers, bearded collies, Labrador retrievers and Rottweilers.

Hopefully, your dog will regain her energy and have many more years of happy adventures with you.

Q: Is it possible for a dog to be depressed? Following the unexpected death of my father, his dog came to live with us. The two were best buddies for many years following my mother's death.

The dog does not seem to enjoy playing and has become lethargic. We don't know what to do.

A: It is possible that your dog is depressed because his best buddy is gone. Not only has he lost a friend, but his routines have likely changed since he moved in with your family.

You need your veterinarian to conduct a complete physical examination to make sure that there are no physical problems causing the lethargy and lack of interest in playing.

If your veterinarian does not find a physical reason for the behavior change, you will have to assume that he misses his friend. Extra attention and encouragement to go for walks and play will eventually help him understand he still has a caring family.

It is likely that time and attention will help your new family member regain his desire to do the things he found enjoyable while your dad was living.

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