Points on Pets: Chronic congestive heart failure strikes dogs, too

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: We have noticed recently that our 13-year-old mixed breed, spayed dog has a persistent irritating cough. We have also noticed that she appears to be uncomfortable most of the time, even when resting on her soft mat. Our dear old dog is not able to go on long walks anymore without nearly collapsing. It appears that she is losing the zest for life she once had. We are worried that our dog is going to have a heart attack and die very soon. Is there anything that we can do to make her more comfortable? Is her coughing caused by having a weak heart?

A: Of course it is impossible to tell you what is causing your old dog's coughing and inability to go on long walks any longer without actually seeing her or knowing much more about her. However, it is likely, based on your brief description, that your dog is experiencing chronic congestive heart failure. With chronic congestive heart failure, it is impossible for the heart to pump blood efficiently. This is usually because the valves between the chambers of the heart are no longer able to close adequately. When this happens the heart tries to compensate by becoming enlarged and pumping faster.

The rest of the dog's body also tries to compensate for the lack of efficiency of the heart by retaining salt and fluid. This causes fluid accumulation throughout the body. Of course this includes fluid retention in the lungs, which causes the dog to cough frequently and be extremely anxious and uncomfortable. Because the fluid is deep in the lungs it cannot be coughed up.

Treatment of chronic congestive heart failure usually includes the use of drugs to strengthen the contractions of the heart, diuretics to reduce the amount of fluid retention throughout the body, salt-free diets and exercise restrictions. Although all of these treatments will likely reduce the frequency of coughing and make the dog with congestive heart failure more comfortable, the long-term prognosis is not good. Recovery usually does not occur and the dog eventually succumbs due to heart failure. You should take your dog to your veterinarian for a physical examination and recommendations regarding her care as she becomes older.

Q: We are really frustrated because we cannot get our Labrador to quit licking his front leg. He has created a sore on his leg and will not stop licking it. We have tried bandaging his leg and placing hot pepper within the bandage. This has not slowed him down. We have yelled at him until we have become exhausted. We are becoming nervous wrecks over this silly problem. What can we do?

A: Of course you should take your dog to your veterinarian as soon as possible. It is very likely that your dog has a lick granuloma, also often commonly called a "lick sore" or "boredom sore". Because most of these sores itch, dogs cannot leave them alone. The dog's only way to deal with the itching is continuous licking. This only makes the situation worse.

Locally applied medications containing steroids are often effective in treating lick sores. Of course, keeping

the ointment on the sore while the dog is healing is a real problem. Lick granulomas that cannot be treated successfully by applying ointments are often treated by injecting them with corticosteroids and radiation therapy. Extreme cases sometimes require surgery to remove the sore.

Your veterinarian can give you the best advice regarding how to successfully handle this very frustrating situation.

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