

Points on Pets: Hip problems cause hardships for large dogs

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: We have been offered a 10-week-old male German shepherd puppy for free. Since we have heard that large dogs often have severe hip problems, we are reluctant to accept this gift. We have always had small dogs and never had any major problems with them.

Because we are on a limited income currently, we cannot afford to pay for surgeries or treatments. Although we want to help our friends, we do not know what to do.

A: Accepting a free puppy is a major decision involving a longtime commitment. Although owning a large breed dog can be fun, you are justified in having concerns. Selecting a normal, healthy puppy will lessen the likelihood that you will face major problems, including bad hips, as your new dog matures.

The disease that affects the hips in large dogs is canine hip dysplasia, commonly abbreviated CHD. The hips joints, where the large bones of the upper rear legs attach to the pelvis, are unstable. The hip joint is a ball-and-socket type joint. In dogs with CHD, the socket portion of the pelvis joint is too shallow to completely surround the ball on the end of the large leg bone. As the dog grows, the instability caused by this abnormality becomes more evident.

The signs of CHD vary among affected dogs. In severe cases, CHD can be seen as early as 3 months of age. In mild cases, signs might not be evident until the dog is 3 years or older.

A noticeable disturbance in moving the rear legs is usually the first sign. Affected dogs often exhibit lameness after prolonged periods of exercise. Some waddle or sway as they walk. Difficulty in rising and early morning stiffness, which subsides as the dog exercises, are also common signs.

Hip pain can lead to aggressive behavior including growling and snapping. Dogs with CHD are often reluctant to move and need help going up stairs and climbing into cars.

You should ask the people who wish to give you the puppy about the history of CHD in the puppy's ancestors. If the puppy's parents, grandparents or siblings have had problems with CHD, you should be cautious. Your veterinarian can examine the puppy and give you advice.

Q: Since we are going to be living this summer in an area with porcupines, we need advice on removing quills from our dog. He is very inquisitive and will likely tangle with every varmint in the area.

A: Unfortunately, removing porcupine quills is often painful. Most veterinarians recommend grasping the quills as close to the dog's skin as possible with pliers, and with quick, powerful tugs pull them out. Because this may hurt the dog, it is recommended to contact a veterinarian who can administer an anesthetic. Most veterinarians also prescribe antibiotics following the removal of quills in order to eliminate infection.

Watching your dog closely while he is investigating his new territory might help prevent an encounter with a porcupine. Prevention is usually better than trying to treat a dog that has a bad experience with a wild animal.

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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