Points on Pets: See vet to get to bottom of back problems

by R.G._Elmor_DVM

Q: We have noticed that our old Saint Bernard mix does not seem to want to play as much as he used to when he was much younger. He seems to be stiff when he first gets up and often seems to be sore over his lower back when we try to help him. Is it likely that he has a real back problem or is just getting old and lazy? If the problem is due to an actual back problem, are there medications that might help him feel less sore and want to play again? Our dog is difficult to take to our veterinarian because of his size and because he does not particularly like being examined and treated.

A: It is impossible to answer your questions definitively without actually seeing your dog and knowing much more about him. Although it might be difficult as you have said, you should have your veterinarian complete a thorough physical examination of your dog. This will help establish if there is a physical problem that can be treated. It is very possible that your dog has a back abnormality.

A condition called lumbosacral syndrome is one of the most common reasons that older large-breed dogs have lower-back pain and stiffness. The spinal column of the dog's lower back - the region between the ribs and tail - is composed of seven individual bones collectively called lumbar vertebrae and three bones called sacral vertebrae. The area between the last lumbar vertebra and the first sacral vertebral bone is the lumbosacral space. The disk between these vertebral bones and the soft tissue structures surrounding the lumboscral space undergo degenerative changes as most dogs get older. This allows abnormal pressure to be applied to the nerves that go through the spinal canal.

Stiffness, lameness and reluctance to get up and move are common signs seen when abnormal pressure is put on the spinal nerves in the lumbar area. Medications can be given to relieve the pain due to the lumboscral syndrome over a short period of time. However, surgery is usually required to give long-term relief. Any dog showing back pain, paralysis or lameness should be examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible. Any delays in diagnosis and treatment of these dogs can result in permanent damage.

Q: Can a root canal procedure be done on a cat? We are skeptical about our veterinarian's recommendation to have this done on our cat. We have never had a dental procedure done on any of our previous cats. We thought our cat simply had an abscess when we took her to our new, young veterinarian.

A: Although dental problems are relatively rare in cats, they do occasionally occur. While cavities involving the exposed part of the tooth can be filled, teeth with cavities extending into their roots must be pulled or treated by root canal procedures. Extensive dental procedures are usually only done on large important teeth such as canines and premolars.

Many veterinarians now specialize in veterinary dentistry for cats and dogs. These specialists are usually affiliated with large referral practices or teaching hospitals associated with veterinary colleges. You might ask

your local veterinarian for a referral for a second opinion by a veterinary dentist. This will give you confidence that your veterinarian has made the best recommendation for your cat.

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