Cognitive Dysfunction & Senility in Dogs

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Q. How do I recognize senility and cognitive dysfunction in my dog?

A. More and more pet owners are noticing a 'behavior problem' in their older dogs that affects canines the same way Alzheimer's disease affects humans. This syndrome has been named 'Canine Cognitive Dysfunction' (CCD) or 'Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome' (CDS). Recent studies have shown that many older dogs with geriatric behavior problems have lesions in their brains similar to those that physicians see in Alzheimer's patients.

Symptoms of canine cognitive dysfunction

According to Pfizer Pharmaceutical, 62% of dogs who are 10 years of age and older will experience at least some of the following symptoms, which could indicate canine cognitive dysfunction:

- Confusion or disorientation. The dog may get lost in his own back yard, or get trapped in corners or behind furniture.
- Pacing and being awake all night, or a change in sleeping patterns.
- Loss of housetraining abilities. A previously housetrained dog may not remember to signal to go outside, and may urinate or defecate where he normally would not.
- Decreased activity level.
- Decreased attentiveness or staring into space.
- Not recognizing friends or family members.

Other signs of cognitive dysfunction may include:

- Anxiety and increased irritability
- Increased vocalization
- Apathy
- Decreased ability to perform certain tasks (eg., tricks) or respond to commands

Diagnosis

To make a diagnosis of CCD, other causes of the behavior problem need to be ruled out. For example, decreased activity may be due to an advancing arthritic condition; inattentiveness may be the result of vision or hearing loss. A dog who shows signs of cognitive dysfunction should receive a full physical examination,

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have appropriate laboratory tests, and possibly specialized tests such as an ECG.

Treatment

If your veterinarian has determined that your dog has CCD, a treatment for this disorder will probably be recommended. A drug called 'Selegiline' or L-Deprenyl, (brand name Anipryl), although not a cure, has been shown to alleviate some of the symptoms of CCD. If the dog responds, he will need to be treated daily for the rest of his life. As with all medications, there are side effects and dogs with certain conditions should not be given Anipryl. For instance, if your dog is on Mitaban for external parasites, Anipryl is contraindicated.

Other management techniques may include the use of antioxidants or 'senior' diets. In addition, dogs with CCD should continue to receive regular exercise and play. If the response to selegiline is inadequate or the dog is unable to take selegiline for other medical reasons, there are other medications and supplements that may provide some benefit.

If your older dog is experiencing behavior problems, talk to your veterinarian. There may be multiple ways to help your pet have a more happy and healthy life in his senior years.

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