

Intervertebral Disk Disease (IVDD)

Intervertebral disk disease or disc herniation is a common cause of back pain and difficulty walking in dogs and occasionally cats. IVDD is a common problem affecting many different breeds of dogs. The most commonly affected dogs are dachshunds, but many other dogs with “long backs” can also be affected such as Basset Hounds, Beagles, Bulldogs, Pugs, Shih Tzus, Pekingese, Welsh Corgis, German Shepherds, Doberman Pinschers are just a few.

Intervertebral disks act as shock absorbers within the vertebral column and permit mobility of the column. There are two main types of disk disease, Type 1 and Type 2. Type 1 is where the inside of the disk becomes calcified and hardened and is most commonly seen in dachshunds. The hardened center will rupture through the outer material of the disk and pinch the spinal cord. Depending on the severity of the disk herniation your pet may experience pain in the neck or back, difficulty walking, inability to walk, and/or loss feeling or sensation of the limbs. Type 1 disk disease occurs very quickly and the pet typically goes from absolutely normal to crying in pain and having difficulty walking. Type 2 disk disease is similar to disk disease in humans, has a more gradual onset, and occurs more often in older, larger breed dogs.

About 75% of disk herniations will occur within the back while about 25% will occur within the neck. Disk herniations within the back with mostly affect the hind legs while herniations within the neck with likely affect all 4 legs.

To diagnose IVDD imaging of the spinal cord must be completed. MRI or CT with contrast are the tests most often used to diagnose the problem as well as to determine which disk is affected. Other possible diseases that can cause similar signs include: FCE (fibrocartilagenous emboli), spinal tumor, vertebral fracture or luxation, or possibly an infection within the spinal cord or covering of the spinal cord.

Treatments for IVDD are separated into two categories 1) conservative therapy vs. 2) surgical treatment. Conservative therapy consists mostly of steroids or non-steroidals, pain medications, muscle relaxers, acupuncture, physical therapy, and most importantly STRICT REST. Because the spinal cord has such a limited blood supply, healing occurs very slowly and may take 6-8 weeks of rest for the patient to recuperate. Surgery depends on the location and type of disc herniation and is usually reserved for patients who have lost the ability to walk or with severe, unrelenting pain.

Prognosis in most cases is going to be favorable if the patient has not lost sensation or the ability to move their legs. The prognosis is poor for patients that have lost sensation.

If you notice any of the above listed clinical signs, please call your veterinarian as soon as possible. Time is usually of the essence in these cases.