Degenerative Myelopathy

**What is it?**

Degenerative myelopathy of dogs is a slowly progressive, non-inflammatory degeneration of the white matter of the spinal cord. It is most common in German Shepherds and Welsh Corgis, but is occasionally recognized in other breeds. The cause is unknown, although genetic factors are suspected. Affected dogs are usually older than 5 years of age and develop non-painful weakness of their hind limbs that causes an unsteady gait. Proprioceptive deficits (unawareness of where its limbs are in space) are the hallmark feature of degenerative myelopathy, but may occasionally be seen in advanced chronic orthopedic disease. Signs slowly progress to paralysis over 6-36 months, although severity of signs may fluctuate. MRI or CSF analysis is performed to rule out other causes of spinal cord dysfunction.

**How is it treated?**

No treatment has been shown to be effective stopping the progression of the disease. Supplementation with aminocaproic acid and vitamins has been recommended, but the safety and efficacy of these treatments has not been proven. Mobility carts drastically improve quality of life in some animals. Physical therapy, acupuncture, or supportive casts/braces may be beneficial.

**What is the prognosis for degenerative myelopathy?**

The long-term prognosis is poor, as the disease progresses to the point of paralysis over a period of 6-36 months. End of life decisions should be based on assessment of the individual dog’s quality of life. Some dogs adjust to their disability much better than others, and may continue to be happy participants in the family’s life even when unable to get up or walk. A personalized treatment plan is important to slow the progression of degenerative myelopathy. Talk to your veterinarian regarding the best treatment protocol for your pet.

**What symptoms may be present as the disease progresses?**

**Early stages symptoms may include:**

- Progressive weakness of the hind limbs
- Difficulty rising
- Stumbling
- Knuckling of the toes
- Scuffing hind feet
- Worn/bleeding nails
- Loss of muscle mass in the rear legs
- Tremors of the rear legs

**Late stages- persistent/worsening early stages symptoms and/or:**

- Urinary and fecal incontinence
- Front leg weakness
- Mental stress, anxiety
- Pressure sores on boney prominences
- Poor hygiene- soiled appearance
- Depression
- Infection/sepsis
- Constipation

**Crisis – Immediate veterinary assistance needed regardless of the disease:**

- Difficulty breathing
- Prolonged seizures
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Sudden collapse
- Profuse bleeding – internal or external
- Unresponsive, comatose
- Crying/whining from pain*

*It should be noted that most animals have high threshold for pain. Any vocalization that is unusual for your pet may indicate her or his pain and anxiety have reached a severe level. Consult with a veterinarian immediately! [If possible, one that knows your pet].