

Dementia in Dogs: Cognitive Dysfunction

Overview

- Just like us, dogs can suffer from cognitive dysfunction ('doggy dementia') as their brain ages.
- It causes behaviour changes that tend to get more severe over time.
- Although there is no cure for cognitive dysfunction, there are steps you can take to help your dog so they can continue to have a good quality of life.
- Contact your vet if you think your dog might have cognitive dysfunction - the earlier they get treatment, the better their outlook.

General information



Cognitive dysfunction ('doggy dementia') is a condition that can develop in some dogs as their brain ages. The cause isn't fully understood, but it's known to be made worse by changes such as a build-up of a harmful protein (beta amyloid), and poor blood flow. It affects memory, makes it difficult for your dog to learn anything new, and leads to behaviour/personality changes (similar to Alzheimer's in people). Dogs with cognitive dysfunction often appear senile, forgetful and confused. Sadly, there is currently no way to prevent or

cure cognitive dysfunction, but fortunately, there are many ways you can keep your dog comfortable and happy after their diagnosis.

Symptoms

The symptoms of cognitive dysfunction can be wide ranging and often start subtle. At the start, you may just notice your dog acting slightly differently, but visible symptoms tend to become worse and more obvious over time. Some of the symptoms you might notice include:

- Confusion
- Peeing or pooping in the house
- [Low energy or depression](#)
- Not sleeping at night
- Forgetting commands
- Pacing
- Staring into space
- Barking more
- Eating less or much more
- [New fears or phobias](#)
- Aggression/changes in behaviour

When to contact your vet

Contact your vet if you've noticed changes in your dog's behaviour because symptoms of cognitive dysfunction usually get worse with time.

Am I eligible for PDSA veterinary treatment?

Treatment

Your vet will usually recommend a combination of treatments for your dog.

Medication

There are a few different medications available that might help your dog's symptoms and slow down the progress of their disease.

Diet and Supplements

There are special diets and anti-oxidant supplements designed to help brain function. Talk to your vet about the best diet or supplements to suit your dog's needs.

Pheromones

Pheromones (such as a DAP collar) can help if your dog is feeling anxious due to their cognitive dysfunction.

Behaviour modification

Your vet may recommend an [accredited behaviourist](#), especially if their symptoms are very severe or if they develop [fears or phobias](#).

Home care

There are many ways you can help your dog stay happy and comfortable at home:

Avoid sudden changes. Your dog may get confused by changes in the house, for example, if you get new furniture or rearrange your rooms, as they might struggle to learn the new layout. Avoid making changes wherever possible, but if they're absolutely necessary, try to make them gradual (for example one room at a time), and give your dog time to adjust at each stage.

Give your dog a 'safe' area or den that always stays the same. You might want to have a comfy bed, their food and water and any favourite toys in their area so they can find everything they need in one place.

Make it easy for your dog to find their way. Try to make each room or passageway in your house different, for example playing a radio in one room or putting a textured rug on the floor.

Stick to a routine. Dogs with cognitive dysfunction will often benefit from regular patterns to their days. Try to feed and walk them at the same time each day and encourage them to stay awake for some time during the day if they seem to be restless at night. The routine will be comforting for your dog and will help you know if

your dog has forgotten something so you don't end up over feeding or exercising.

Try gentle, regular exercise and activities. Encourage your dog to keep active by taking them on short walks in their favourite places. To keep them safe, it's best to keep them on the lead, under close supervision, or in an enclosed field/garden. Make sure they have time to sniff and investigate, as this will help keep their brain active. You might also want to try playing simple games at home.

Keep training simple. Try to focus on only using a few simple commands to avoid confusing your dog. If they seems to be forgetting things they used to know, start re-teaching their basic training using [positive, reward based methods](#).

Keep your dog safe if they forget commands or toilet training. If your dog suddenly starts to forget their training it can be very frustrating or even dangerous for them, especially if they stop responding to their name when you're out on walks. If your dog suddenly seems to have forgotten something, try not to get angry or upset with them. Instead try taking steps to keep them safe and stop them becoming confused, like regular trips outside to go to the toilet and keeping them on a lead when out for walks.

Spend quality time with your dog. The more positive time you spend together the more like it is your dog will remember and respond to you. Having fun with you can also help your dog feel more confident and happy. Consider putting aside time each day to play a game, have a quick positive, training session or even just cuddle up together and relax.

Don't put anyone at risk. Dogs with cognitive dysfunction can act unpredictably - and this can include aggression, even if they've always been friendly before. If you notice your dog becoming [nervous](#) in certain places, or around certain people, try to remove them from the situation as quickly as possible. Never force them into a situation if they seem scared or confused- this could be dangerous for them and for you. It's also even more important that [children](#) are never alone with a dog with cognitive dysfunction.

Outlook

It's possible for most dogs to have a good quality of life for some time after being diagnosed with dementia, especially if they respond well to treatment and management. However, it's a condition that tends to get slowly worse, and in some cases, can become severe. Outlook tends to depend on how your dog responds to treatment and how well you can manage the condition at home. If you are finding it impossible to manage them, or your dog starts to suffer, it may be kindest to put them to sleep.

How do I know when it's time to say goodbye?

If your dog's symptoms become very severe, they start having more bad days than good, their [quality of life](#) has significantly deteriorated, or they become a danger to themselves, it might be kindest to consider putting them to sleep ([euthanasia](#)). Always chat with your vet about your concerns so they can answer your questions and help you make the right decision for you and your dog.

Cost

Treatment for a poorly pet can become very expensive, so it's important to speak openly to your vet about your finances, the cost of treatment, as well as what you think is right for your dog. There is often more than one treatment option, so if one doesn't work for you and your dog then your vet may be able to offer another.

Consider [insuring your dog](#) as soon as you get them, before any signs of illness start. This will make sure you have all the support you need to care for them.

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