

## Degenerative Myelopathy in Dogs

### Overview

- Degenerative myelopathy is a condition that affects the nerves in the lower spine.
- It causes weakness, gradual paralysis of the hind legs, incontinence, and can sometimes even affect the front legs.
- Most dogs with degenerative myelopathy develop symptoms at around nine years old.
- Sadly, there is no cure for degenerative myelopathy. Instead, treatment will focus on keeping your dog comfortable and happy for as long as possible.
- Degenerative myelopathy is not painful, but often causes a significant reduction in quality of life, especially in its later stages.
- Average life expectancy for a dog with degenerative myelopathy is one - two years.

### What is Degenerative Myelopathy?



Degenerative myelopathy (also called Canine Degenerative Radiculomyelopathy or CDRM), is a disease that causes the nerves in the lower spine to stop working properly. It causes weakness, paralysis in the back legs, and incontinence (both urinary and faecal), all of which get

worse over time. In some rare cases, it can even affect the front legs. Degenerative myelopathy isn't a painful condition, but in its later stages tends to severely impact quality of life. Sadly, most dogs with degenerative myelopathy eventually lose control of their legs, bladder and bowels completely, and need to be put to sleep. The average life expectancy of a dog with degenerative myelopathy is 1-2 years from diagnosis.

## Symptoms

Symptoms of degenerative myelopathy tend to develop at around 9 years old and get gradually worse over a period of 6-18 months. Symptoms include:

- Scuffing the back feet while walking
- Difficulty jumping, climbing steps, getting into cars, and walking long distances
- Weak, wobbly back legs that become gradually more paralysed with time
- Trouble getting up and down
- [Urinary incontinence](#) (leaking urine)
- Faecal incontinence (leaking poo)
- [Collapse](#)
- Front leg paralysis

## Treatment and homecare

Sadly, there is no way to cure or stop degenerative myelopathy progressing. Instead, your vet will help you keep your dog happy, comfortable, and mobile for as long as possible. There are many things you can do at home to help your dog, including:

### Light exercise and physiotherapy

It's important to keep your dog's muscles as strong as possible, especially their back legs. Regular light exercise, physiotherapy, and hydrotherapy may be beneficial, but it's important to be aware that none are proven to improve symptoms of degenerative myelopathy. Always follow your vet's advice regarding how much to exercise your dog, and

never overdo it - exercise is often much harder and more tiring for a dog with degenerative myelopathy.

### **Foot protection**

If your dog drags their back feet and scuffs their claws/toes it may be necessary to provide them with some protection to stop their feet becoming painful. A pair of [protective dog boots](#) are likely to be useful, but be careful they aren't too tight.

### **Managing incontinence**

A large part of nursing a dog with degenerative myelopathy is dealing with their incontinence. It is a good idea to cover their bed with something that will soak up urine and keep them dry. You will also need to clean and dry them regularly to stop urine scald.

### **Bedding**

Choosing the right bed is important. If your dog struggles getting in and out of a high-sided bed, try a flat padded mattress. Memory foam is a good, comfortable option.

### **Monitor for urine infections**

Dogs with degenerative myelopathy often develop urinary incontinence, which increases the risk of urine infections. Your vet may request regular urine samples to check for infection. [Watch our video on how to collect a urine sample from your dog.](#)

### **Non-slip flooring**

As your dog's back legs become weaker, they will find it difficult to prevent themselves slipping. Wherever possible, cover slippery floors with carpet, rugs or non-slip matting.

### **Help getting up and down**

If your dog needs help getting up or lying down you may find it useful to support them with a sling, or a towel under their tummy.

## Outlook - when is the right time to say goodbye?

Your vet will focus on keeping your dog comfortable and happy for as long as possible. However, most dogs with the degenerative myelopathy either pass away, or need putting to sleep within one - two years of diagnosis. It's important to monitor your dog's quality of life as their condition develops, and to talk openly with your vet about how they (and you) are coping. If at any point, you think they are suffering, or you are unable to look after them, it may be necessary to consider [making the difficult decision to put them to sleep](#).

## Breeds at risk of DM

Degenerative myelopathy is an inherited condition (meaning it's passed from parent to puppy), and is most common in:

- [German Shepherd Dogs](#)
- [Boxers](#)
- [Corgis](#)
- [Bernese Mountain Dogs](#)

## Prevention

We should not breed from any dogs at risk of degenerative myelopathy, or those whose parents have had degenerative myelopathy. [Genetic testing is available](#) to highlight those dogs at risk.

## When to contact your vet

Contact your vet if you think your dog might have degenerative myelopathy, or they have any of the symptoms listed above. **You know your dog best, even if they don't have the exact symptoms listed above, contact your vet if you are still concerned.**

## Cost

The cost of treatment will depend on how you decide to manage your dog, but can become expensive. However, the biggest consideration when deciding on a treatment plan will be your ability to care for your dog. Degenerative myelopathy is a condition that requires intensive

nursing care at home, especially in the later stages. As well as your finances and the cost of treatment, it's very important to speak openly to your vet about what you think is right for your dog, and your ability to look after them as they deteriorate. There are often several treatment options so if one doesn't work for you and your pet then the 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 ensure you have all the financial support you need to care for them.

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