

Degenerative Myelopathy (DM)

Overview

- Degenerative myelopathy (DM) is a condition of the spine that causes a gradual paralysis of the back end.
- Symptoms include weak, wobbly back legs, incontinence and paralysis.
- DM usually starts at around 8-9 years old and gets gradually worse over several months.
- DM is not painful but reduces quality of life.
- Sadly, there is no cure for DM. Treatment will focus on keeping your dog comfortable and happy for as long as possible.
- DM is a genetic condition that most commonly affects German Shepherd Dogs.



What is Canine Degenerative Myelopathy (CDM)?

Degenerative myelopathy (DM), previously called Chronic Degenerative Radiculomyelopathy (CDRM), is a disease of the spinal cord that causes gradual paralysis of the hind legs. DM is

most commonly seen in German Shepherd Dogs at around 8-9 years old (more 'at risk' breeds listed below).

DM is a slow deterioration of nerves in the spine that causes gradual paralysis of the back end. DM isn't painful but sadly, because of the effect it has, most dogs that develop it are put to sleep within 1-2 years of diagnosis.

Symptoms

Signs of DM usually start from around 8 years of age. At first, they can be very subtle, particularly if your dog already has arthritis. Symptoms often include:

- Weak hind legs
- A wobbly back end
- Difficulty jumping
- Difficulty climbing steps
- Difficulty getting into cars
- Difficulty walking long distances

Over time (6-18 months), your dog's symptoms are likely to get worse and you may notice:

- Dragging back feet/legs
- Scuffed claws due to dragging/scraping
- Incontinence (pee/poo)
- Collapse
- Eventually their back legs will become paralysed and their front legs can be affected

When to contact your vet

Contact your vet if you start to notice your dog becoming weak and wobbly on their hind legs.

You know your dog best, if they don't have the symptoms listed above but you are still concerned it's always best to contact your vet.

Treatment

Sadly, there is no treatment for DM and it's not possible to reverse it once it has started. Treatment will focus around keeping your dog happy, comfortable and mobile for as long as possible.

Medication and other therapy

Your vet may prescribe medicines, physiotherapy and/or hydrotherapy to see if they help. However, none have been proven to improve the symptoms of degenerative myelopathy.

Urine infections

Dogs with DM often become incontinent and incontinence raises the risk of developing urine infections. Your vet may request regular urine samples to check for infection. Check out our video on how to catch a urine sample from your dog.

Quality of life

Your vet will focus on keeping your dog comfortable and happy, for as long as possible. This will include nursing at home (see below). It's important to keep an eye on your dog's quality of life as their condition develops and to talk openly with your vet about how they are doing. Sadly, as your dog's symptoms worsen you may need to consider the difficult decision to put them to sleep.

Home care for DM

You will need to make sure that your dog stays happy and comfortable at home.

Bedding

Choosing the right bed is important; your dog may struggle to get in and out of an enclosed bed, providing a large, flat padded bed will help them stay comfortable. Memory foam beds are kind on joints.

Managing incontinence

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

Foot protection

If your dog drags their back feet and scuffs their claws/toes it may be necessary to provide them with some protection i.e. a pair of protective dog boots. Speak to your vet about the most suitable product for your dog. Be careful not to put anything too tight onto your dog's feet.

Outlook

Once diagnosed, your dog's symptoms will slowly progress until their paralysis becomes too severe to cope with. If at any point, you, or your vet think your dog may be suffering, it may be necessary to consider making the difficult decision to put them to sleep.

Most dogs with DM pass away, or need putting to sleep within 1-2 years of diagnosis.

Breeds at risk of DM

- German Shepherd Dog
- Boxer
- Corgi
- Labrador
- Bernese Mountain Dogs

Prevention

Genetic testing is available to highlight dogs at risk of DM. We should not breed from at risk dogs or dogs whose parents have had DM.

Cost

Treatment for degenerative myelopathy can become expensive. Consider insuring your dog as soon as you get them, before any signs of illness start. This will ensure you have all the support you need to care for them.

It's also very 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 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.

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