

Vestibular Disease in Dogs

Overview

- Vestibular disease/syndrome is a problem that affects balance and coordination; caused by any condition that disturbs the balance (vestibular) centre in the ear and brain.
- Symptoms of vestibular disease usually appear very suddenly and make your dog feel as though the world is spinning around them (vertigo).
- Most commonly, vestibular disease affects older dogs and the cause is unknown.
- Most dogs with vestibular disease improve within 2-3 days.
- Contact your vet for an appointment if your dog has symptoms of vestibular disease, ask for a same-day appointment if they are vomiting or distressed.



Symptoms

If your dog has one or more of these symptoms, they may be suffering from vestibular disease:

- Loss of balance
- Head tilt
- Leaning to one side
- Flickering eye movements (nystagmus)
- Vomiting
- Standing with their legs wide apart
- Walking in circles
- Reluctance to stand up

What is vestibular disease?

Vestibular disease is a group of symptoms caused by a disruption to the vestibular (balance) centre in the ear and brain.

Vestibular disease often appears suddenly and unexpectedly. One moment your dog seems fine, the next they are struggling to walk. Vestibular disease makes your dog feel as though the world is spinning around them. It can be very distressing to witness, and many owners mistake vestibular disease for a stroke. Fortunately, with careful nursing, vestibular disease often improves within a couple of days.

Causes

There are a variety of conditions that cause vestibular disease, including:

Old dog vestibular disease – affects older dogs, appears suddenly and for no apparent reason.

An inner ear problem – such as infection, inflammation, a tumour or polyp.

A brain problem – such as infection, inflammation or a tumour.

Certain medicines – some medicines are toxic to the ears.

When to contact your vet

Contact your vet for an appointment if your dog has symptoms of vestibular disease. Ask for a same-day appointment if they are vomiting or distressed.

Treatment

Treatment for vestibular disease depends on its cause.

Idiopathic/old dog vestibular disease. Older dogs that develop vestibular disease often improve over 2-3 days with nursing and anti-sickness medication. Some can be looked after at home; others need to stay in the veterinary hospital for more intensive nursing care.

Ear infection. If your vet suspects an inner ear infection, they are likely to prescribe antibiotics as well as nursing care and anti-sickness medication.

Other causes. If your dog doesn't improve in a few days, or your vet suspects something more serious is causing your dog's symptoms, they may suggest further investigations. These investigations may need to be done at a referral centre (specialist vets) and can include ear swabs, x-rays, a CT scan, MRI scan or taking a sample of the fluid that sits around the

brain and spine. Once your dog has a diagnosis, you will be able to discuss the treatment options.

Nursing a dog with vestibular disease

Keep them safe. Keep your dog confined to a small padded area so that they can't walk into things, fall over or hurt themselves.

Food and drink. Make sure your dog eats and drinks regularly; - you may need to handfeed them for the first few days.

Toileting. You will need to help your dog when they go out for a wee or poo - either carry them, or support them fully whilst they walk (this may take two people if you have a big dog).

Recovery time and outlook

Idiopathic/geriatric vestibular disease. If your dog has idiopathic vestibular disease, their **outlook is good**. They are likely to improve significantly within a couple of days and fully recover in 1-2 weeks. Their head tilt may remain, but they often adapt and cope well. It's possible that your dog could have more than one episode of idiopathic vestibular disease.

Other causes. The outlook for other causes of vestibular disease depends on whether it's treatable or not. Ear infections, ear polyps and medication reactions tend to have a better outlook because they are mostly treatable. Sadly, there are some conditions that have a worse prognosis, such as tumours and severe infections that don't respond to treatment.

Cost

Treatment for a dog with vestibular disease can become very 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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