

ORCHARD HILLS VETERINARY HOSPITAL

Epilepsy

What is epilepsy?

It is a periodic disease, which is characterized by seizures (convulsions) with partial or complete loss of consciousness.

What are the signs?

Attacks usually commence without any warning, the dog falling to the ground, and then undergoing a series of muscular jerks. There is extension (stiffening) of the limbs, followed by paddling and chewing movements. The eyes are fixed and staring. Loss of control can result in salivation and passing of urine and faeces. Seizure episodes generally last less than 2 minutes, although attacks of much longer duration can occur. Following an attack, the dog gets up, looks around in a dazed manner and may then run away with no idea where it is going. During an attack a dog should be left alone: It cannot swallow its tongue! Attacks may occur frequently or infrequently. Milder seizures, with the dog remaining conscious, may sometimes occur.

Which dogs are affected?

Although it can be seen in all aged animals, idiopathic epilepsy is generally first observed in dogs between 1 and 5 years of age. Seizures, which begin outside this age group, are more commonly caused by other disease processes. Although it is seen in all breeds of dogs, there is an increased occurrence in certain breeds for example German Shepherds, Labradors, Golden Retrievers.

What causes epilepsy?

The cause of idiopathic epilepsy is still unknown although it is likely to be a familiar disease in certain lines of dog. A thorough veterinary examination including some pathology tests are required to help distinguish idiopathic epilepsy from other causes of seizures.

Can seizure episodes be prevented?

As the cause of idiopathic epilepsy is unknown, there is no specific treatment to remove the cause of seizures. However, medication with appropriate drugs can either prevent, or considerably reduce, the frequency and intensity of the seizures, enabling the dog to lead a normal life. Although a number of drugs have been used to prevent seizures, the initial drug of choice is phenobarbitone. This is considered the safest and most effective preventative therapy.

Once phenobarbitone therapy is commenced, seizures may still occur for up to 4 weeks until the required levels of the medication are reached in the blood and brain. Also, according to the animal's response, the dose rate may have to be adjusted during the course of treatment. Dogs typically require medication for the duration of their life. In most epileptic dogs, control of seizures with phenobarbitone is usually

successful.

However, some dogs develop an unresponsive form in which even very high doses of phenobarbitone are ineffective. When this occurs, control may be achieved by the addition of a second drug, potassium bromide that can be used in conjunction with phenobarbitone. The combination of these two medications result in effective control and prevention of seizures in most dogs. As with phenobarbitone, it can take several weeks before potassium bromide has an optimum effect.

How can the success of treatment be monitored?

To assist in monitoring the success of treatment, the frequency of seizures should be recorded on the calendar on the back of this form. Because one of the most common causes of poor control is too low a dose rate of the medication (due to large differences in response between dogs), your veterinarian may suggest monitoring the levels of the medication in the blood. The dose rate of the medication can then be adjusted according to blood levels and degree of seizure control.

Are there any side effects of the medications?

The main side effect seen with these medications used to effectively control epilepsy are sedation and unsteadiness. This is generally seen at the commencement of treatment and usually disappears after a short period as the dog adapts to the medication. In a very small percentage of cases, some effects on the liver can occur and it is, therefore, recommended that on occasions, blood tests to assess liver function be undertaken.

Conclusion

Although epilepsy is a frightening disorder to both the dog and the owner, treating with these specific drugs provides effective control in most cases. This allows the dog to lead a full and active life when maintained on the medication.