



Dementia in dogs

It has been estimated that nearly a half of dogs over eight years of age suffer from a degree of “cognitive dysfunction”, or dementia. The symptoms are often put down to old age - at least initially - but it can be distressing and disruptive for dogs and their owners. Early diagnosis and treatment can slow the progression, and significantly improve the quality of life, of affected dogs.



What causes cognitive dysfunction?

The cause of cognitive dysfunction is not fully understood. The condition is associated with brain lesions closely resembling Alzheimer's in people. It is thought that the brain's high oxygen requirements, and limited ability to heal, make it particularly prone to damage from free radicals the toxic by-products of

What are the symptoms?

- Disorientation - affected dogs may appear confused, and less able to cope with change or unusual surroundings. They may bark for no apparent reason
- Less interaction - dogs may be less inclined to play, and show less interest in strangers or other dogs. They also show less interest in their surroundings
- Altered sleep patterns - dogs may spend much of the day asleep but be restless or bark at night
- Loss of house training - urinary and faecal accidents are common.
- These symptoms may just be put down to old age, or other problems such as arthritis.

How is it diagnosed?

The diagnosis is based on the behavioural changes seen with the condition. A thorough clinical examination is used to rule out other conditions, such as arthritis, or eyesight problems that might cause similar symptoms. Blood tests may also be used to rule out potential causes of the symptoms.



How can we treat cognitive dysfunction?

- The use of special diets containing both antioxidants and alternative energy sources, to reduce oxidative damage, have been shown to reduce the symptoms associated with cognitive dysfunction.
- There are also medications which increase blood flow to the brain, and increase the levels of natural chemicals in the brain, so improving brain activity.
- Increased stimulation through walks, play, and interaction with other dogs will help keep the brain active, and healthy.
- Don't ignore other problems - painful joints may cause reluctance to exercise and increase apathy. Steps will make it harder for old dogs to get outside for toileting.
- Avoid change - as this is likely to confuse and distress dogs with cognitive dysfunction - and make the problem worse. Stick to a routine.



What is the prognosis?

Canine cognitive dysfunction is a progressive condition, and so symptoms are likely to get gradually worse. However, the specific treatments listed above will often produce an initial improvement, and slow the progress of the disease. Supportive measures and general attention to the needs of an older dog, will also help to improve the quality of life of affected dogs.

For further information on cognitive dysfunction in dogs, please speak to one of the practice vets.