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Fibrocartilagenous Embolism (FCE) information sheet

XXXX has been diagnosed with an FCE following their neurological exam and MRI imaging. FCE is a condition which comes on very quickly and often without any warning, however most dogs do recover.

What is an FCE?

FCE is caused by a blockage of the blood vessels supplying the spinal cord, similar to a stroke, and is sometimes referred to as an ischaemic myelopathy. This lack of blood supply causes damage to the nerves running through the affected area of the spinal cord. Whilst the blood supply can be cut off by a number of different causes, the most likely cause is a fibrocartilagenous fragment of disc, which explains the common name for this condition.

What causes an FCE?

It is not known exactly what causes an FCE, other than the injury to the spinal cord is the result of the blood supply being cut off by a small fragment of disc material. With time, blood vessels develop to provide the spinal cord with an ongoing blood supply.

FCE injuries are most commonly seen in mid to large breed dogs during activity (minimal trauma like heavy exercise, jumping for a frisbee, etc), but dogs of any breed or age can be affected.

What are the signs of FCEM?

The clinical signs of FCEM are highly variable, but typically they are acute in onset, and whilst there may be a yelp or indication of pain at the moment of injury, patients are typically not painful after the immediate event. The exact clinical signs will depend on where along the spinal cord the injury has occurred. Patients may become wobbly on their legs, or in the more severe cases can develop complete paralysis of one or more legs.

How do you diagnose FCEM?

There are other conditions which can appear very similar to FCEs, such as intervertebral disease (IVDD), spinal fracture or spinal dislocation. A diagnosis of FCEM is often made by ruling out these other causes of acute paralysis.

A full neurological examination will be carried out to localise which area of the spinal cord is thought to be affected. If the examination is compatible with a spinal injury then MRI imaging would likely be recommended.

In cases of an FCE there will be no visible compression of the spinal cord on the MRI imaging, but we may be able to see an area of inflammation and swelling which occurs as a result of the injury.

Can FCEM be treated?

There is no specific treatment for FCE, but most dogs tend to recover within a few weeks provided they have retained the ability to feel pain in their feet. Post-injury care is largely supportive, including rest, physiotherapy and hydrotherapy. Some cases will recover very quickly, but others may require ongoing care for a longer period at home.

The prognosis for recovery is based on the severity of the spinal cord injury. Pets who lose the ability to feel their toes have a more guarded prognosis. Pets who retain sensation in their toes typically will have the capacity to recover.

Ultimately, the rate and extent of recovery is variable and difficult to predict. Dogs with mild spinal cord injuries can recover quickly and fully. Dogs with severe injuries may also recover, but the time taken can be much longer.