

Text for Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> November 2004

By Nick Horniman

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There are many medical conditions that pets can get that are shared by their human owners. Problems involving the blood flow to the brain can lead to a human having a stroke and dogs can get a disease that looks very similar. Dogs suddenly developed a head tilt, walked around in circles showing disorientation, are sick and have diarrhoea. Vets don't call this a stroke but Canine Vestibular Disease.

The word Vestibular refers to the connections between inner ear and the brain. When these connections are disturbed, the dog has difficulty with balance and orientation. They appear 'drunk' or 'sea sick' and get very scared as they cannot understand why their world has changed so quickly.

The problem lies with one of the main nerves that join the brain. Called the Vestibular nerve, it runs from the inner ear to the brain and is responsible for both hearing and balance. This nerve can deteriorate so that electrical signals cannot get through it. This can occur through ageing, with infection or with trauma.

It is important for the vet to quickly decide what has caused the Vestibular syndrome as treatment options can vary depending on cause. As inner ear infection is common, dogs always have a thorough ear examination and full blood tests to rule out foreign bodies down the ear putting pressure on the eardrum and causing an infection. Ear infections can easily get worse, affecting the balance centre of the inner ear and causing severe symptoms.

If the dog has suffered a knock to the head, inflammation around the brain can cause Vestibular syndrome. The eyes are examined, looking for signs of concussion. The head and neck are examined, looking for signs of damage. Sometimes the dog has an attack of Vestibular syndrome through ageing but then falls over and bangs its head. Suddenly you've got the initial condition to treat plus secondary trauma to the head.

After initial blood samples and full examination, treatment should be rapid. Potent antibiotics are used, usually by injection, to fight any infection. Corticosteroids are used to remove any inflammation at the

inner ear or long the Vestibular nerve. These injections can be repeated daily until signs of improvement are seen. For long term improvement we use a drug that increases blood oxygen to the brain tissue. This improves the dog's co-ordination and reduces chances of recurrence. There is also a brand new diet available that has been made specifically for older dogs suffering with disorders of loss of balance and control. Using these treatments in the long term makes a big improvement to the dogs quality and quantity of life.

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