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Tracheal Collapse

Tracheal collapse is a chronic and progressive disease of the trachea (windpipe). The trachea is a flexible tube, kept open by multiple small C-shaped rings of cartilage, the circle made complete by a flat membrane. The disease appears to be the result of multiple factors. There is an initial anatomical predisposition in certain individuals, particularly small breeds such as Yorkies, Poodles and Chihuahuas. Other factors increase the likelihood of clinical signs such as obesity, respiratory infections or inhalation of irritants or allergens. Sometimes no predisposing factor can be identified.

Initially, dogs often present with a harsh, dry cough, often exacerbated by the constraint of a collar around the neck whilst pulling on the lead.

Diagnosis requires a number of tests to confirm this condition, and exclude other diseases which can present in a similar way, such as heart and lung diseases.

A) Chest x-rays may show up a narrowed windpipe. They can also be useful for assessing the size of the heart. Other respiratory conditions may be ruled out. Chronic bronchitis often occurs secondary to tracheal collapse and this can be looked for on an x-ray.

B) Bronchoscopy involves placing a small tube with a video/camera on the tip to visualize the inside of the airways. The movement of the inside of the airways can be visualized in real-time, the level of inflammation and mucus production assessed, and small samples of airway secretions can be sampled and submitted to a laboratory for their assessment and to see if any bacteria can be cultured. This enables the most appropriate antibiotic to be prescribed if necessary.

If concurrent heart disease is suspected, an ECG, and/or an ultrasound examination of the heart may be suggested to help choose the most appropriate combination of drugs and give a better idea of longer term prognosis.

Sometimes, patients will present more acutely and require emergency medication to stabilize them prior to investigations. If your pet ever appears to be struggling to breathe then please seek veterinary advice immediately.

Treatment options

Medical management

- a) Weight loss
- b) Avoiding inhaling substance such as smoke which greatly exacerbate this condition
- c) Use of a harness rather than a collar

In the short term

- Use of steroids to reduce the inflammation
- Use of antibiotics for any concurrent bacterial bronchitis

In the long term

- Possible use of cough suppressants, depending on the amount of mucus formed, and severity of the cough
- Possible use of bronchodilators (to widen the airways)
- Possible use of steroids intermittently, or if required long term, trialing an inhaled form of steroids, similar to those used by asthmatics.

Medical management is successful in approximately 70% of cases (without other concurrent disease). In the few percent who do not respond, surgery is an option but does carry with it some surgical risk.

Tracheal collapse is not a condition that can be cured, rather the aim is to reduce the ongoing inflammation and cough and maintain a good quality of life. Flare-ups are common and often require intermittent increases in the frequency and amount of medication - your vet will probably want to check your pet on a regular basis to advise on any changes in medication. If your pet's condition changes in anyway whilst on medication, we would advise you to make an appointment for a check over so we can advise you on any medication changes that may be appropriate.

Should your pet have trouble breathing then please contact us immediately for advice.