

Thoracolumbar Disc Disease

While not limited to small breeds of dogs, there is a much higher incidence of disc disease among Dachshunds, Lhasa Apsos, Poodles, Beagles, and Pekingese to name a few breeds. This is primarily due to genetic factors, i.e. the discs of certain breeds of small dogs are predisposed to premature senile changes which lead to eventual rupture. A mild disc rupture may merely cause your pet some back pain and discomfort. Unfortunately, a severe disc rupture can result in complete paralysis with urinary incontinence, and no hope of recovery. The chance of your dog's recovering from an episode of disc disease depends on many things. Your pet's overall health, the number of previous episodes of back pain, the part of the spinal cord that is damaged, and the length of time that has ensued between the onset of paralysis and your pets receiving veterinary care all play a role in the final outcome. However, the best indication of possible return to normal function is your dog's neurologic status at the time of presentation.

Some animals with minimal neurologic dysfunction can get better with medical management alone. Others may be candidates for a **fenestration** surgery. In this procedure a window is cut in the fibrous outer rim of the disc and the inner tooth-paste like portion is scooped out, thereby lessening the chances of the disc ever causing your dog future problems. This procedure does not limit your pet's future activity or mobility in the least. It merely decreases the chances for future disc ruptures and paralysis. Animals that are paralyzed become candidates for a **myelogram** and **laminectomy**. These procedures should be done as soon as possible after your pet becomes paralyzed to maximize the chances for recovery. First, some dye is injected around the spinal cord, so x-rays can be taken to determine exactly which disc has ruptured. This procedure is called a myelogram. Then a laminectomy is performed. This involves the surgical removal of part of the bony shell of the vertebrae covering the damaged portion of the spinal cord. Once accomplished, it allows the spinal cord to move away from the ruptured disc material and allows the surgeon to remove the material and take the pressure off of the spinal cord. This prevents any further damage to the spinal cord. Then, as the swelling gradually goes out of the spinal cord, some nerve function should return. There is a remote possibility that your pet's neurologic status may be worsened by a myelogram and surgery. This chance is small however, and the potential benefits outweigh any risks involved. These setbacks are generally not permanent, but can prolong the postoperative rehabilitation time and provide an added source of stress to the owner, doctor, and pet.

It is important to realize that recovery will not happen overnight. It takes a minimum of four weeks to determine the final outcome of surgery, - i.e. whether or not your pet will walk again. That means your paralyzed, incontinent pet will require good nursing care for this four week period of time. One must realize that when dealing with a spinal cord injury, even with the best medical and surgical management it's possible that your pet may never recover function in its limbs. The pet that remains permanently paralyzed and incontinent can become a burden to its family, for obvious reasons. However, with good nursing care and the use of K-9 carts, these pets can live happy, healthy lives. Again, where your pet falls in this spectrum of disease can best be determined after a thorough history and neurologic exam have been taken. Only then can an approximate chance for recovery be given, allowing you to make an informed decision on what should be done.



VCA Animal Specialty Group

5610 Kearny Mesa Rd., Suite B | San Diego, CA 92111
858-560-8006 | www.vcaanimalspecialtygroup.com

If you have any questions or problems during your pet's rehabilitation, please do not hesitate to contact us. We are available to answer questions during regular office hours as well as evenings and weekends via our voice mail system. Please leave a message and a member of our staff will return your call as soon as possible. Thank you for trusting us with the care of your pet.