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PANCREATITIS

What is pancreatitis?

The pancreas is a vital organ which lies on the right side of the abdomen high up near the stomach. It has two functions:

1. To produce enzymes which help in digestion of food and,
2. To produce hormones, such as insulin. When the pancreas becomes inflamed, the disorder is called pancreatitis. It is a disease process that is seen commonly in the dog. There is no sex, or breed predisposition and dogs of any age can be affected but it is more common in older dogs.

There are two main forms of acute (sudden onset) pancreatitis:

1. The mild, oedematous form and
2. The more severe, haemorrhagic form. A few dogs that recover from an acute episode of pancreatitis may continue to have recurrent bouts of the disease, known as chronic, relapsing pancreatitis. Pancreatitis can result in secondary damage to surrounding organs, such as the liver, bile ducts, gall bladder, and intestines.

What causes it?

The cause of pancreatitis is not known; however, there may be several contributory factors. It is often associated with a rich, fatty meal (left overs from BBQ, sausages, fat cut off meat and marrow bones are common culprits). In some cases, it may be associated with the administration of corticosteroid drugs however, some dogs with pancreatitis do not have exposure to either.

Under normal conditions, digestive enzymes produced by the pancreas are activated when they reach the small intestines. In pancreatitis, these enzymes are activated prematurely in the pancreas instead of in the small intestines. This results in digestion of the pancreas itself. The clinical signs of pancreatitis are often variable, and the intensity of the disease will depend on the quantity of enzymes that are prematurely activated.

What are the clinical signs?

The diagnosis of pancreatitis is usually based on clinical signs and a blood test. The disease is typically manifested by nausea, vomiting, fever, abdominal pain, and sometimes diarrhoea. Some dogs with mild cases may simply be off their food. Occasionally if the attack is severe, acute shock, depression, and death may occur. Laboratory tests usually reveal an elevated white blood cell count and an elevation of pancreatic enzymes. Some of these abnormalities may be picked up on a routine blood test but a specific test checking for elevation in a specific pancreatic enzyme (canine pancreatic lipase or CPL) is usually performed if pancreatitis is suspected. Blood may be sent to the lab for a more accurate test or a quicker but slightly less accurate test is available in the clinic if a result is required more urgently.

How is pancreatitis treated?

The successful management of pancreatitis will depend on early diagnosis and prompt medical therapy. The treatment is mostly supportive care while the dog recovers, pain relief is particularly important as it is quite a painful condition. Most dogs require hospitalization on iv fluids and will receive anti-vomiting medication, pain medication and antibiotics. Very mild cases may be able to be given medication at home. Hospitalisation time usually ranges from a couple of days to over a week depending on how sick the dog is. More severe cases may require aggressive medical treatment including plasma transfusions in some cases. Once dogs are feeling better and able to eat they are fed a low fat diet to aid in their recovery.

Will my dog recover?

The prognosis depends on the extent of the disease when presented and a favourable response to initial therapy. Dogs that present with shock and depression have a very guarded prognosis. Most of the mild-moderate forms of pancreatitis have a good prognosis.

Will there be any long-term problems?

There are three possible long-term complications that may follow severe or repeated pancreatitis. These complications are quite rare. If a significant number of cells that produce digestive enzymes are destroyed, a lack of proper food digestion may follow. This is known as pancreatic insufficiency and can be treated with daily administration of enzyme tablets or powder in the food. If a significant number of cells that produce insulin are destroyed, diabetes mellitus can result and insulin therapy may be needed. In rare cases, adhesions between the abdominal organs may occur as a consequence of pancreatitis. However, most dogs recover with no long-term effects.

Dogs that have had a bout of pancreatitis in the past should not be given fatty foods or they may get it again. Corticosteroids should also be avoided where possible – depending on what they are being used for it is not always possible to avoid these.