

PANCREATITIS

Pancreatitis, or inflammation of the pancreas, is a disease seen frequently in dogs. In fact, 92% of dogs over age twelve have evidence of current or past pancreatitis if the pancreas is biopsied. Most of these dogs will never have shown any symptoms of disease, so pancreatitis is probably very common but usually mild. Unfortunately, for some dogs it can be severe or recurrent.

The pancreas is an important organ located near the small intestine. It is responsible for the production of most of the enzymes that digest food, and it also produces insulin. When the pancreas is diseased or injured, the enzymes it produces leak in and around the pancreas, damaging it and the other organs nearby. These enzymes that are leaking out break down fat and protein locally, instead of traveling down the pancreatic duct to the intestines. In effect, the dog digests its own tissues. The abdomen soon becomes inflamed, and may subsequently become infected.

An animal with pancreatitis may show such symptoms as lethargy, fever, vomiting, diarrhea (which is often bloody), refusal to eat and abdominal pain. Symptoms may start suddenly or come on gradually, and can range from mild and intermittent to severe and life-threatening.

The disease may be seen in any breed at any age, but it seems to be more common in female, middle aged dogs. Pancreatitis often occurs soon after ingestion of garbage, dead animals or a fatty meal (scraps of fatty meat, peanuts, whole milk, chicken skins, etc.), but many times the exact cause is not known. There are many factors which contribute to pancreatitis. Among them are obesity, high fat diets, drugs such as corticosteroids (frequently used to treat allergies and other conditions), infectious diseases and kidney disease. Reflux of intestinal contents into the pancreatic ducts may be a significant factor also. Whatever the cause, once the pancreas is damaged a vicious cycle is established as more enzyme leakage leads to more damage, leads to more leakage, etc.

Pancreatitis can be easily confused with many other diseases and conditions which cause similar symptoms. A physical exam will reveal whether your animal is feverish, dehydrated or painful. Blood tests are usually done to ascertain whether an infection is present, and to test for higher than normal levels of pancreatic enzymes in the blood. Because the liver is located next to the pancreas often liver inflammation is evident on blood tests as well. Abdominal radiographs (x-rays) or ultrasound may also assist in diagnosis, and in assessing the extent of the damage. Occasionally, surgery to get a biopsy or to remove a pancreatic abscess or tumor may be needed.

Treatment depends on the severity of the disease, but in general includes antibiotics,

Caring People Helping Pets



2082 Cheyenne Court, Grafton, WI 53024 • phone: 262-375-0130 • fax: 262-375-4196 • www.bestfriendsvet.com



withholding food for one or more days to allow the digestive tract time to heal, drugs to control vomiting and diarrhea, and fluids or shock treatment as necessary. Severe cases require hospitalization and IV fluid therapy for several days to more than a week. Milder cases may be treated and then released into the owner's care. Because fat stimulates the pancreas to release more enzymes it is very important to feed a bland, low fat diet for at least the first few days after an episode of pancreatitis. Dogs with chronic or recurrent problems may be on these diets for life.

Pancreatitis can be a serious and life threatening disease. Even with intensive care, in severe cases the dog may not survive. Chronic or severe pancreatitis may also lead to peritonitis, diabetes and pancreatic insufficiency - an inability of the damaged pancreas to produce enough enzymes to enable food to be digested.

To avoid pancreatitis feed your dog a good quality food, avoid overfeeding and table scraps, and keep your dog away from garbage, dead animals and other sources of digestive upset.