

WINTER 2008

Your Vet



Milk fever can be a medical emergency

Many people enjoy the thought of breeding a litter of puppies from their beloved female dog. If you have a bitch that you are considering breeding from, you will be concerned that she labours safely. Once birth is complete, you will exhale, looking forward to enjoying the new additions to your pack! However, do remember that one of the most dangerous health problems related to reproduction comes when you are relaxing and enjoying the fruits of your dog's labour... those gorgeous puppies!

Milk fever (eclampsia or puerperal tetany) occurs when the blood calcium levels become dangerously low, leading to a raft of potentially dangerous problems. Milk fever occurs in lactating bitches and is most common in small breeds, usually in the first three weeks after the puppies' arrival. Milk Fever has also been reported in cats, but is rare. Anecdotal evidence suggests that 'good milkers' are more prone to milk fever, but it can also be seen in bitches with less dramatic milk production. Milk Fever occurs because the bitch is using her own stores of calcium when producing milk. This causes lowered blood levels of calcium in her own body. The clinical signs occur as a result of the important role of calcium in muscle action and physiology.

This is a medical emergency! Signs of milk fever include anxiousness, pacing, panting, whining, salivation, muscle twitching, stiff gait, slow heartbeat, vomiting, diarrhoea, fever, itchiness, and unusual behaviour. These signs may eventually progress to seizures, high fever, high heartbeat and potentially death through overheating and organ failure.

Due to the urgent need for treatment in these cases, the diagnosis of the condition is made on the basis of the history and clinical signs. A blood test may be taken and retained, but in most cases medical therapy must be initiated before the low blood calcium levels can be confirmed.

As a medical emergency, treatment **MUST** be administered immediately. Ideally this involves placement of an intravenous catheter and where possible, monitoring of the heart with an ECG. A specific type of calcium is administered slowly until the signs regress. IV fluids are often required if there is fever, high heart rate or dehydration. In addition, blood clotting times may be assessed if seizures have been prolonged and there is a high fever. If the clotting takes too long a plasma transfusion may be required. This is uncommon, but may occur in severe cases.

After the emergency has passed, vets have various opinions on the ideal plan. Many recommend immediate weaning and hand raising of the pups to prevent a recurrence. Others recommend calcium supplements and careful monitoring of mum and pups, weaning only if there is a recurrence. The pros and cons of each approach need to be carefully assessed and considered by owners faced with this decision. Anecdotally, many vets believe that this will recur with future litters so owners also need to consider this when deciding whether to breed again.



Clever colour coded budgie beaks

When it comes to deciding who is dad and who is mum, budgies are obliging little birds. The two sexes are colour coded.

Budgies have a strip of tissue over their beak called the cere. In juvenile budgies this area is a tan colour but as they get older, the male's cere becomes a brilliant blue, whilst the female's cere stays a tan to pink colour. Just to keep us guessing, male budgies can develop testicular (sex gland) tumours that produce hormones. These hormones can change the colour of the cere from blue back to brown!



- Feline diabetes is treatable
- Extra TLC this Winter
- Lymphoma in dogs and cats

inside



Protect your dog from a 'stick-up'

Dogs love chasing sticks but, as many vets will testify, this extreme sport is not without considerable risk. We often see dogs that have been on the wrong end of the stick after an awkward bounce or an exuberant catch. The stick is then thrust down the throat with the combined force of the dog and the stick's momentum. This can cause severe lacerations to the back of the throat. Small fragments can also break off, leading to abscesses further down the track.

Should your dog sustain a stick injury, seek immediate attention from your vet. As the injuries are often at the very back of the throat, in tricky to visualise areas, it can be difficult to assess the degree of haemorrhage and trauma that has occurred. To allow a thorough examination, your vet may need to anaesthetise your animal. It is helpful if you bring in the offending stick as this may give a clue to the depth of the injury and the likelihood of retained splinters and fragments.

Treatment depends on the severity of the injury and may involve surgery, antibiotics and pain relief. The best treatment is prevention - choose a benign stick substitute such as a ball, Frisbee or rope toy.



Chromodacryorrhea - a big word for a little animal

When rats are stressed they can excrete red tears from their eyes. This unusual problem goes under the impressive name of chromodacryorrhea - a name to learn and impress fellow rat owners with!

Stressors such as illness, dirty cages and poor nutrition result in the excretion of a red pigment from two little glands near the eye. The red tears crust around the eyes and nostrils, making the rat appear to be bleeding from these areas. Chromodacryorrhea is not a dangerous condition but serves as an excellent warning sign that all is not well in your rat's world. Treating underlying illness and improving your rat's diet and housing will result in a resolution of the chromodacryorrhea.

Diabetes in cats is complex but treatable

Diabetes mellitus, or 'sugar diabetes', is thought to affect up to one in 200 cats. Fat, older male cats are particularly at risk. Diabetes is a complex metabolic disorder caused by a deficiency of insulin. Insulin is a hormone that helps the cells of the body to absorb glucose. Obesity and some hormonal disorders can also affect the body's response to insulin, resulting in diabetes.

The cells of the body need glucose (from digested food) as their energy source. Without insulin, the cells cannot absorb glucose, and they effectively starve. Since the glucose in the bloodstream is not being taken into the cells, the concentration of glucose in the blood increases. Excess glucose is then excreted through the kidneys into the urine, dragging water molecules with it. Large quantities of urine are produced and the cat then drinks more to compensate for the fluid loss. Hence, one of the first symptoms of diabetes mellitus is increased thirst and increased urine production. Owners will note that the litter tray needs frequent changing and the water bowls frequent refilling.

Increased thirst is usually combined with an increased appetite, yet despite eating more, the cat tends to lose weight. As the disease progresses, the liver is affected and electrolyte levels alter. The cat may go off its food and become lethargic and depressed. The body tries to feed its starving cells by breaking down stored fats which can lead to the production of ketones. Ketones are excreted in the urine and if present, can make an animal feel ill. Left untreated, diabetic animals will eventually become seriously ill with a condition known as ketoacidosis. This is a medical emergency requiring aggressive management with intravenous fluids and intensive monitoring.

A diagnosis of diabetes mellitus can be confirmed with blood and urine tests. Early management can occasionally be achieved with oral medication but nearly all affected cats will go on to require injections of insulin. These are administered just under the skin, once or twice daily by the owner. Owners of diabetic cats are usually quite apprehensive about injecting their own pet but nearly all become extremely competent at this task. Injections must be administered at the same time every day, and food and exercise routines kept as regular as possible. Diet can also influence blood glucose levels so your vet will recommend a diet suitable for your particular pet's needs.

Monitoring is a very important part of treating a diabetic cat. Blood and urine tests will need to be performed regularly in order to check that the cat is receiving the correct dose of insulin. The main aim of treatment is not to have a perfect blood test result but to ensure that the cat is in the right range to maintain a happy, healthy life. If the response to insulin is not good, your vet will take steps to improve this and may adjust the type and dose of insulin.

Owning a diabetic cat requires a commitment both financially and emotionally, however it is also an intensely rewarding and bonding experience.



Laughter is the best medicine

Dog Property Rules

1. If I like it, it's mine.
2. If it's in my mouth, it's mine.
3. If I can take it from you, it's mine.
4. If I had it a little while ago, it's mine.
5. If I'm chewing something up, all the pieces are mine.
6. If it's mine, it must never appear to be yours anyway.
7. If it just looks like mine, it's mine.
8. If I saw it first, it's mine.
9. If you are playing with something and you put it down, it automatically becomes mine.
10. If it's broken, it's yours.

Tips for dealing with 'bitey' pups

A pup's main tool of exploration is his mouth and a set of pointy baby teeth. These can make any boisterous puppy game a painful experience for their owner, so pups need to be taught acceptable play behaviour.

When mouthing behaviour becomes nippy or too exuberant, use a short sharp verbal command such as "NO" or "BA". Hopefully this will stop the pup in his tracks and give you a moment to regroup. Remove your hands from his mouth, ask him to sit and reward him with a treat and a pat. If the pup has progressed past the point of listening, he should be placed in a 'time-out' area, such as the laundry, to settle down until he can play nicely again.

Never hit a puppy, especially on his nose or around his face. This creates head-shy animals, who may bite from fear when hands approach them.

Provide suitable toys as substitutes for hands. Pups need to learn that toys are acceptable to chew on but hands are not.

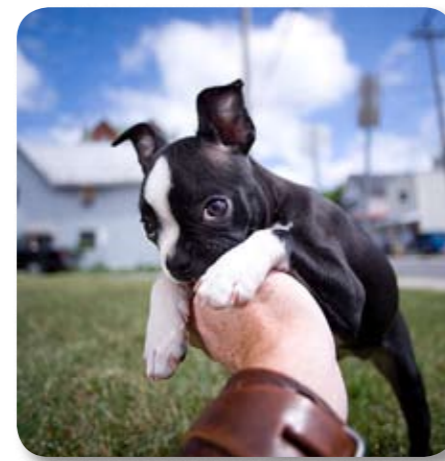
Encourage retrieving games but avoid tug-of-war games. It is highly likely that you will tire of tug-of-war long before your puppy does. He will perceive your eventual disinterest as a 'win' which, in his mind, elevates him in the family hierarchy.

As tempting as floppy jowls are, avoid grabbing them and rough-housing with your pup. This tends to cause over excitement, and stimulates mouthing behaviour.

Children also need to be taught how to behave around puppies. The squealing and flapping arm movements of excited children stimulates puppies to mouth and jump up to try and catch the tantalising waving fingers. Get the children to tuck their hands in their armpits until the puppy is less excited, then they may pat him or use a toy to play with him.

Be sure to provide plenty of exercise and environmental enrichment (bones, chew-toys and sacrificial digging areas in the garden) for your puppy. This will alleviate boredom and may make a pup a little less likely to use you as their chew-toy and plaything.

Persevere with all of the above - young dogs can learn new tricks very quickly.



Belt up - good advice when you have a pet onboard

Seat belts are not just for the two legged members of the family. In the event of an accident, an unrestrained pet is a potential missile - a danger not only to itself but also to other occupants of the car.

There are excellent harnesses available for dogs that click around the body and then through a loop of seat belt. These allow the dog a small amount of mobility but prevent him from leaning out of the window or being flung through the car.

If your dog travels on the back of a ute, he should be restrained using two leads anchored at each corner of the cab or one lead anchored in the middle of the cab. The lead should then be clipped onto the dog's flat collar, never a choke chain. The leads must be short enough to prevent him hanging his head over the side of the ute or being able to fall off the back. Beware



Your loved ones will need some extra TLC in the winter months

The cooler temperatures of winter can often exacerbate conditions such as arthritis. Our pets may be telling us in their very subtle way that they have stiff and aching joints. Dogs may have difficulty jumping into the car and be slower during walks - even to the point of sitting down on the job. Cats may have difficulty grooming especially in those areas along the back, which require a degree of contortionism. They may also be reluctant to jump onto favourite benches, beds and chairs. Arthritic animals are often stiff on rising after a rest and may even limp on the affected limbs.

The signs of arthritis are often very subtle and can be easy to miss. Animals are extremely good at masking the symptoms of discomfort. This is necessary when you are a wild beast surrounded by predators. However in the domestic situation this reluctance to show pain can make it very difficult for owners to assess their pets' well being. Consequently, if your pet shows any of the symptoms described above, you can safely assume that they have arthritic pain. Since pets (especially cats) will mask minor pain you can also assume that animals with noticeable symptoms of arthritis will have a significant level of discomfort.

If you suspect your pet has arthritis, seek advice from your vet. There are many excellent medications which can modify the progress of the disease and give safe, long-term pain relief.





Lymphoma is a common cancer in dogs and cats

Lymphoma is a common cancer affecting both dogs and cats. The cancer involves lymphocytes, - a type of white blood cell formed in the bone marrow. These cells (known as B and T cells) produce antibodies that fight infections and cancers. Normally lymphocytes circulate around the body, and are found in tissue such as lymph nodes. This circulation means lymphoma is often wide-spread ('systemic'). Lymphoma is a very aggressive cancer and is usually fatal within months of diagnosis if left untreated. The terms, lymphoma, lymphosarcoma and malignant lymphoma are often used to indicate the same disease.

Some authorities believe lymphoma is more common in the following breeds of dogs: Boxers, Golden Retrievers, Labradors, Cocker Spaniels, Bassett Hounds, Scottish Terriers, German Shepherds and Poodles. Some believe it is less likely to occur in Chihuahuas, Dachshunds and Pomeranians.

According to US veterinary oncologist, Dr Alfred Legendre, cats that have Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV) infection, are two to five times more likely to develop lymphoma than uninfected cats. Cats with Feline Leukaemia are sixty times more at risk.

Clinical signs of lymphoma vary depending on which organs are affected. In dogs with Stage 1 lymphoma, a single lymph node may be involved. Stage 5 lymphoma may involve many different body systems. Cats most often present with kidney lymphoma, gastrointestinal lymphoma or lymphoma in a major chest lymph node which results in breathing problems.

Diagnosis of lymphoma is based on the history and the clinical signs, together with blood tests, diagnostic imaging and, where possible, tissue sampling. A lymph node under the skin can be easily sampled with a needle and syringe (fine needle aspiration). This may indicate the need for a biopsy, or may provide enough information to make a diagnosis. Internal lymphoma will require more advanced diagnostic techniques such as ultrasound and bone marrow biopsies.

If lymphoma is not treated, the disease will progress and survival may range from days to months depending on the nature of the lymphoma and stage of disease at the time of diagnosis. If the owner chooses palliative care, corticosteroids may be used (usually orally) at high doses. This will not cure the pet or lengthen its life, but may improve the quality of life as the disease runs its course.

Another treatment for lymphoma is chemotherapy. Multiple drugs are used to kill as many cancer cells as possible. This puts the patient into remission - a state where cancer cannot be detected and the patient shows no clinical signs - BUT remission does not always indicate cure.

The nature of the drugs used for chemotherapy means many vets believe that, where possible, chemotherapy should be performed by a specialist with special safety equipment. This allows the pet to be treated with the most current drug combinations, and enhances safety for the staff. However many private practices also provide chemotherapy for lymphoma, very often with the support of a specialist. When under specialist care, most patients can tolerate medications with minimal side effects.

Early diagnosis will lead to a better response to chemotherapy - ideally when there are minimal clinical signs and no other medications have been used. There are many different chemotherapy protocols for the treatment of lymphoma in dogs and cats. Generally the drugs are used in a such a manner as to avoid side effects and improve quality of life.

Many pet owners find the treatment of lymphoma in cats and dogs to be rewarding. The financial costs are high (often in the thousands of dollars) but owners usually find that the additional quality time with their animals makes the expense worthwhile. The time spent in remission also allows owners some time to come to terms with the possible impending loss of their pet **and** to maximise the fun, games and love for their pet during that time.

