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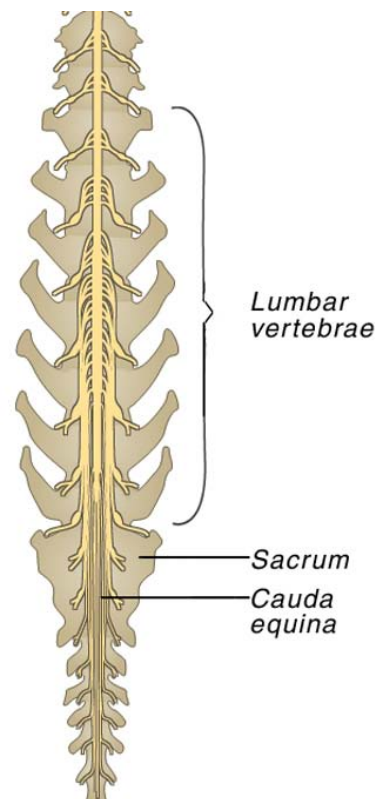
CANINE BACK PROBLEMS

Back problems in dogs are not uncommon and can be due to a variety of causes ranging from intervertebral disc problems such as occur with us (slipped disc), trauma due to a fall or road accident, or infection involving the spinal discs, the bone of the spine or sometimes the nerve tissue itself. All these diseases are extremely painful and affect the dog's motility.

Just like us, spinal pain can affect any area of the dog's spine, from the neck to the pelvis. Most commonly dogs are affected with lower back pain, known scientifically as **cauda equina syndrome or lumbar sacral syndrome**. This defines the area where the lumbar spine ends and the sacrum, which is part of the pelvis, commences. This area is where the spinal cord divides into a number of major nerves. These control movements of the hind legs and tail and also help to control passage of faeces and urine.

The syndrome covers a collection of diseases that can occur when these nerves become compressed or trapped. This causes pain, paralysis, faecal and/or urinary incontinence or, in some cases, hind leg lameness which is similar to sciatica. The most common cause of the nerve pressure in dogs is **lumbar sacral stenosis**, a narrowed spinal canal. This is a condition which is most often seen in large breed dogs such as the German Shepherd.

Other causes affecting a wide variety of breeds and sizes of dogs include infection of the intervertebral disc, injury, a spinal tumour or instability of the joint.



What are the clinical signs?

Pressure on the spinal cord of the emerging nerves causes inflammation which can also affect the muscles in the immediate area. Affected dogs are in pain and often a first sign is crying out when attempting to jump into a car or negotiating steps or stairs. Pressure on the muscles of the lower back is often resented. Others signs can be faecal or urinary incontinence. Some dogs mutilate their feet or tail with constant chewing.

What is the treatment?

Initially if your dog is overweight, weight reduction is essential and your veterinary surgeon will advise the best way to go about this. Cage rest may also be necessary depending on the extent of trauma to the spine.

Again, depending on the severity of the condition your veterinary surgeon may prescribe anti-inflammatory drugs together with pain control via NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) to give relief.

After a period of cage rest your veterinary surgeon may advise gentle exercise in order to build up surrounding muscle. The best form of exercise is hydrotherapy as the buoyancy and resistance of the water works the muscles and joints without putting pressure on the spinal cord. The warm water increases blood flow to the area improving nerve function.

If the animal has become paralyzed as a result of spinal injury then hydrotherapy can strengthen the limbs and introduce normal gait within a controlled environment. The hoist can be used to support the animal in the water and the hydrotherapist can manipulate the limbs, improving the range of movement. The water walker can then be used once the muscles have strengthened to reiterate the correct walking motion whilst the water continues to provide buoyancy and resistance.



Rachel operating the hoist and Harvey Jones in the water walker

*This client education handout is based on material written by Trevor Turner, BVetMed, MRCVS, FRSH, MCI Arb, MAE.
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