

Vestibular Disease

A brief guide on disease progression including end-of-life symptoms

Common Signs of Pain

- Panting
- Lameness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Pacing
- Abnormal posture
- Body tensing
- Poor grooming habits
- Tucked tail
- Dilated pupils
- Licking sore spot
- Muscle atrophy
- Decreased appetite
- Vocalizing/yowling
- Reclusive behavior
- Aggressive behavior
- Avoiding stairs/jumping
- Depressed
- Unable to stand

Before your pet's condition becomes unmanageable or they are losing quality of life, it is important to begin end-of-life care discussions. Learn about pet hospice care and/or euthanasia services in your area so you are prepared for what lies ahead.

What is it?

A normal vestibular system will alert the brain if we are standing, sitting, lying down, falling, spinning in circles, and keep the body balanced and the head in correct orientation. The vestibular system is comprised of nerves that start in the brainstem and continue to the inner ear. Vestibular disease affects the ability of the brain to recognize abnormal body positions and also affects the brain's ability to correct these abnormalities. Disorders of the vestibular system are divided into central vestibular disease and peripheral vestibular disease. Central vestibular disease occurs due to an abnormality within the brainstem, whereas, peripheral vestibular disease occurs due to an abnormality of the nerves within the inner ear commonly brought on by acute inflammation. Most cases of disease affect older dogs and have no known cause, therefore called Idiopathic Vestibular Disease.

How is it treated?

Treatment of this disease is dependent on the cause. Often times a cause of disease is unknown and clinical signs will gradually go away on their own. In these cases it may not be a bad idea to treat the animal for motion sickness. Sometimes disease is caused by damage to the nerves in the inner ear (by trauma or ear infections). Central vestibular disease may be the result of a brain tumor, compromising nerve input. A complete work-up should be performed by a veterinarian whenever a dog presents with vestibular disease, as a treatable cause may be revealed. Vestibular disease is not believed to be painful in most cases, but rather incredibly awkward and sometimes completely debilitating.

What is the prognosis for vestibular disease?

The underlying cause of the vestibular disease should be treated accordingly. If a cause cannot be found, it is possible that the disease will resolve spontaneously within 1-2 weeks. Even if the condition resolves, lingering signs like a mild head tilt may persist and the disease can return at anytime. The decision to euthanize is often made when the quality of life has already been in question and/or when the severity of signs is so great that the dog can barely function for greater than 48 to 72 hours. A dog appropriately managed can live a relatively comfortable, productive life. There are cases, however, in which vestibular disease is not manageable and the dog may live the rest of its life in pain. A personalized treatment plan is important. Talk to your veterinarian regarding the best treatment protocol for your pet.

What symptoms can present as the disease progresses?

EARLY STAGES:

- Falling
- Incoordination
- Head tilt
- Circling/rolling
- Stumbling/"drunken" walking
- Nystagmus (rapid movement of eyes-up and down or side to side)
- Vomiting
- Anorexia
- Dull mentation
- Solitary confinement

LATE STAGES:

- Persistent early stages
- Weight loss
- Reclusive behavior
- Pressure sores
- Diarrhea
- Seizures
- Pneumonia

CRISIS:

Immediate veterinary assistance needed regardless of the disease

- Difficulty breathing
- Prolonged seizures
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Sudden collapse
- Profuse bleeding – internal or external
- Crying/whining from pain*

**If your pet vocalizes due to pain or anxiety, please consult with your tending veterinarian immediately.*