

# Liver Disease in Dogs

A Brief Guide • Part of the Educational Pet Disease Series from Lap of Love

## Signs & Symptoms

### Initial Symptoms

- Regurgitation
- Weight loss
- Anorexia
- Nausea
- Lethargy
- Vomiting

### Intermediate Symptoms

- Reclusive behavior
- Decreased appetite
- Light colored stool
- Diarrhea
- Fever
- Black tarry stool

### Advanced Symptoms

- Discolored urine
- Yellow tinged skin, eyes, ears
- Large pendulous belly
- Bruising easily
- Vision changes
- Increased drinking/urination

### Crisis Situations Requiring Immediate Medical Intervention

- Excessive bleeding that won't stop
- Difficulty breathing
- Unable to walk
- Blue gums and/or tongue
- Sudden collapse
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Crying in pain
- Seizures

## What Is It?

The liver is an important organ with a variety of critical responsibilities within the body including digestion of protein, removal of toxins from the blood stream, bile metabolism, production of clotting factors, and the storage of minerals and vitamins. Liver disease can develop from a large number of underlying causes including infectious, aging, genetic factors, cancer, toxins, drug side effects, inflammation, immune-mediated and metabolic disease. Certain breeds tend to be more at risk for congenital (present at birth) liver disease such as Dobermans and Yorkshire Terriers. Due to the many vital roles of the liver, once dysfunctional, liver disease can have fast and serious consequences for the whole body. Inflammation of the liver, hepatitis, may develop, which without treatment can lead to a loss of functional liver tissue replaced by scar tissue. Fortunately, as the liver often can heal from insult, many liver diseases can be managed.

## Diagnosis

Liver disease, depending on the cause, will produce symptoms ranging from vague to specific. Many dogs experience an overall feeling of malaise that may progress into nausea, vomiting, anorexia, weight loss, diarrhea and possible abdominal pain. As the disease progresses, if the liver cannot heal, end stage liver disease will result in jaundice with a yellow tinge visible when examining the skin, ears, eyes, and gums. More specific liver diseases, such as cancer, may produce symptoms associated with that particular illness. Liver dysfunction is generally detected on bloodwork and physical examination. Determination of the cause of the dysfunction may require a liver biopsy to reach a firm diagnosis. Additional diagnostics can include: urine/fecal evaluation, liver specific panels, bile acids, and x-rays and ultrasound of the abdomen.

## Treatment and Management

The underlying cause of the liver disease will dictate the type of treatment needed. Generally, most therapies aim to ease the workload on the liver, resolve or slow any primary diseases, and restore and support liver cell health. Prescription liver diets can help support the liver on a daily basis. Mild forms of liver disease may respond to medical management with oral medications and supplements. A natural substance, SAME, found in most cells of the body, is a liver protectant available in supplemental form. Vitamin E has been found to protect liver cells from damage, and Ursodiol is a natural bile acid that can help clean out gallbladder sludge that has collected over time. Milk thistle has been used for years as a liver cell protectant as well. Traditional antibiotics, judicious use of steroids, and symptomatic treatment are often rational and useful treatments. In more severe cases of liver disease, surgical options may be available for those suffering from diseases such as liver cancer.

## Prognosis

Early disease detection and proactive therapeutic intervention has been found to significantly improve the prognosis of liver disease. The prognosis for liver disease with mild presenting forms is also very good. More serious diseases such as cancer and end stage cirrhosis carry a guarded prognosis. The



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prognosis and treatment is best dictated by the diagnosis of the underlying issue. Therefore, consultation with an internal medicine specialist is a good idea to get the most specific information possible to formulate a proactive plan. Many pets with liver disease can live many years with a good quality of life. Therefore, liver disease is considered a treatable and manageable disease.

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## *Management Tips*

### *Consider providing:*

- Easily accessible food and water
- Access to "safe" quiet areas
- Warm, soft sleeping areas
- Natural calming products
- Canned food over kibble
- Prescription liver diets and supplements
- Palliative removal of fluid from the chest/abdomen by your veterinarian

### *Try to:*

- Be consistent with medicating and stomach medications as needed
- Provide proactive pain management
- Track your dog's appetite, weight etc.
- Track the good days vs. the bad days
- Limit stress (kids, noise)
- Use gentle handling at all times
- Let your dog set his/her activity level
- Provide consistent preventative care
- Provide easy access to common areas
- Check ear/eyes for jaundice (yellow tinged skin)
- Have a supply of vomiting, diarrhea, stomach, and pain meds on hand
- Avoid feeding any table food

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.