Canine Hypothyroidism

Hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid gland) is a common disease in middle-aged to older dogs. There has been a reported higher prevalence in some breeds (boxer, dachshund, Doberman pinscher, golden retriever, Great Danes, schnauzers and poodles), but it can be seen in all breeds and mixed breed dogs. Hypothyroidism is essentially non-existent in cats.

Clinical signs are often slowly progressive and sometimes go unnoticed by owners who see their dogs every day. Many times people think their dog is just getting older or slowing down. Common metabolic signs include weight gain (while feeding same amount of food), lethargy, mental dullness, exercise intolerance and heat-seeking behavior. Irregularly we see aggression in hypothyroid dogs.

Hypothyroidism can have a number of effects on a dog’s skin as well. Hair thinning or hair loss are common; thickening or darkening of skin, recurrent skin or ear infections, and greasy or dull coat are all possible.

Diagnosis of hypothyroidism in dogs is based on physical examination and screening blood work, usually followed by confirmatory tests (free T4 or sometimes TSH – thyroid stimulating hormone assay). Many other diseases can cause a low Total T4 in dogs, so it is important to rule out other diseases or to follow up with testing as recommended by your veterinarian.

Treatment for hypothyroidism in dogs is similar to treatment for people. Dogs receive a small pill usually twice daily that is a thyroid hormone supplement. Initial dosing is based on body weight, so we re-check total thyroid hormone levels in 4 weeks after starting the supplement to ensure appropriate levels circulating in the blood, then every 4-6 months after that to ensure that each dog remains at an appropriate level.

Activity level and alertness usually improves within the first weeks of treatment, and skin/coat issues usually respond in 1-4 months of treatment. Hypothyroidism in dogs generally requires life-long treatment. Most dogs that are overweight are either over-fed or under-exercised, rather than being hypothyroid – it is important to listen to all recommendations made by your dog’s veterinarian.