



Understanding Canine Epilepsy

Canine epilepsy is a periodic disease characterized by seizures with partial or complete loss of consciousness.

What Are The Signs?

Episodes usually commence without warning, with the dog falling to the ground & undergoing limb extension, followed by paddling & chewing movements. The eyes are fixed & staring. Loss of control can result in salivation, urination & defecation. Seizures usually last less than 2 minutes.

Which Dogs Are Affected?

Although seen in all ages, Idiopathic Epilepsy is generally seen in dogs between 1-5 years of age. Seizure in dogs outside this age group is more often from other disease processes. There is an increased incidence in German Shepherds, although seen in all breeds. In general, the younger the animal, the more successful will be the treatment of seizures if no serious brain lesion exists.

What Causes Epilepsy?

Cause of Idiopathic Epilepsy is still unknown, although it is likely to be a genetic disease in certain lines of dogs.

How can it be diagnosed?

There is no specific test for epilepsy. As there are a large number of causes of seizures, diagnosis is by ruling out other causes. This is done with a variety of Blood tests and scans. Some causes of seizures are very transient so it is often important to get Blood samples as close to the time of the fit as possible.

Are Seizures Dangerous?

Most epileptic seizures are self limiting so they stop by themselves and are not life threatening. Dog can not swallow their tongues so don't try and put anything in their mouths. The only dangers are if they are in an unsafe area like in a pool or at the top of stairs.

The exception is when they have one seizure after another, a condition called 'Status Epilepticus' which is quite rare. If this occurs, take your pet to the Vet immediately.

Are they painful?

They are unconscious during the seizure and all activity is involuntary. Similar to human fits, have no memory of the fit and no recollection of pain. They are often exhausted afterwards from all the muscle activity.

Can Seizures be predicted?

There are usually 3 phases of a fit which may or may not be present and for variable amounts of time.

Pre-ictus – Sometimes owners notice a change in behaviour prior to a fit but most have no warning signs.

Ictus – The seizure itself.

Post-ictus – After effects of a fit. This can be just exhaustion or behavioural changes or even temporary blindness.

Can Seizures Be Prevented?

Most seizure disorders, regardless of cause, will worsen if not controlled or treated. As the cause of Epilepsy is unknown there is no specific treatment to remove the *cause* of seizures. They can however be readily “Controlled”. ‘Control’ of seizures does not always mean the elimination of all seizures but rather a reduction in frequency and severity enabling the dog to lead a normal life. In the majority of cases we eliminate the seizures. Successful management of seizures often requires several medications or adjustments in dosages before a successful combination or dosage level is found.

Once therapy is commenced seizures may still occur for up to 2 weeks until the required levels of medication are reached in blood & brain. Medication must be given lifelong.

How Can Success of Treatment Be Monitored?

Monitoring serum levels of anti-seizure drugs is the only reliable way of determining the effectiveness of a given dose. One of the most common causes of poor control is too low a dose rate caused by your pet clearing the drug from their system more efficiently over time. A “Blood Phenobarbitone Panel” is recommended every six months to check drug levels and to check for any liver damage. This is used as a guide to dose adjustment.

Frequency of seizures should also be recorded as a guide to control.

Are There Any Side Effects?

Sedation & unsteadiness are the main effects of these medications, generally seen at commencement of treatment & disappearing as the dog becomes adapted to the medication.