

For most of us standing, walking, or even running is a relatively simple activity that causes us little or no pain. This is true for the majority of our canine friends as well. Sadly though, there are some dogs that suffer from severe hip joint pain that makes everyday activities difficult or even impossible.

Dogs can have hip pain for many reasons, but one of the most common problems we see is Hip Dysplasia. I find there is a lot of confusion in the dog owning public about this disease so I thought it might be something worth discussing.

The term dysplasia simply means “abnormal development of...” Therefore Hip Dysplasia describes an abnormal development of one or both of the hip joints. This concept of Hip Dysplasia being a developmental disease is important to keep in mind when we talk later about its treatment and prevention. By the very nature of this disease it is a problem that starts in puppyhood. As the puppy’s skeletal structure matures the hips may not develop correctly to support the full body weight and orthopedic function of the mature dog. Usually puppies do not show signs of discomfort or any evidence for their abnormal hip function. Later, often years later, as an adult dog, he will begin to develop arthritis in these abnormally functioning hips and this arthritis is what causes the pain. Interestingly, most dogs with mild Hip Dysplasia never show any signs of pain. But unfortunately, in some cases, this can be a very painful and debilitating disease.

Some symptoms of Hip Dysplasia and arthritis are persistent limping in one or both hind legs, difficulty in rising up from a sitting or lying position, or simply a reluctance to jump up into the car or onto the couch like they used to do so easily. If the discomfort becomes severe some dogs will exhibit a change of personality or become more irritable.

Veterinarians are often asked, “What causes Hip Dysplasia?” I wish there was a simple, easy answer to this question, but in reality this is a very complex problem. Most veterinary orthopedic specialists agree that Hip Dysplasia is caused by many factors in the young puppy’s life; not the least being genetics. If a puppy carries the gene for Hip Dysplasia, it’s inevitable his hips will not develop normally. Many believe that nutrition during the rapid growth phase (4-10 months of age) can play a role in the degree of disability eventually seen in Hip Dysplasia. We’ll come back to that point when we talk about prevention. There may be other, currently unknown, environmental factors that impact the growing hips of these puppies.

I’m often asked during an examination of a young puppy if I can tell if the pup has any hip problems. Unfortunately, unless the dysplasia is very severe, veterinarians cannot easily distinguish the dysplastic puppy from a normal puppy. Remember, at this young age the pup is relatively light weight and there has not been enough time for arthritis to develop so even the puppy with hip dysplasia will often walk normally. X-rays form the cornerstone of Hip Dysplasia diagnosis. Only when we look at the hips with X-rays can we tell if they are normal. Sometimes the hip development will not look abnormal until 1-2 years of age. For this reason we often wait until 2 years of age, when the dog’s bone structure is mature, to X-ray a dog for Hip Dysplasia. Occasionally, we need to sedate or anesthetize a dog to enable us to position the hips accurately for the X-ray. A poorly positioned X-ray can be quite misleading.

Therapy for the Hip Dysplasia and the ensuing arthritis depends largely on the dog’s age and lifestyle. If the dog is young with no signs of hip pain usually no specific treatment is recommended other than keeping the dog at a lean body weight and moderate regular exercise. With young dogs that have severe hip joint abnormalities surgery can be done to improve the joint’s “fit” and ultimately help it to function better. If the patient-young or old-is painful, various medications are used to ease the discomfort. Alternative forms of care such as acupuncture may help some dogs. Ultimately if the hip pain is not responsive to medications, surgical options are considered. Some larger veterinary institutions, such as the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, now routinely offer hip replacement as an option. This procedure involves replacing the painful arthritic hip joint with a prosthetic joint that functions more normally, without the pain. This procedure, while a bit expensive, enjoys a 90-95% success rate.

As with any disease process prevention is always a better option. Because Hip Dysplasia is genetically passed from one generation to the next, it’s very important to avoid breeding any dog with this problem. Remember that many dogs with Hip Dysplasia never show outward signs of their problem. For this reason *any* dog that is to be bred, no matter what its “make or model” should be screened with hip X-rays before it’s bred. If Hip Dysplasia is found, the dog should not be bred. This is a rule that anyone involved in dog breeding-whether professional dog breeder or backyard hobbyist-should always strictly follow. Talk with your veterinarian about having this vital evaluation done.

Some years ago many believed that high doses of Vitamin C could help prevent Hip Dysplasia. Veterinary researchers have never been able to substantiate this claim and therefore the practice is not recommended.

In large breed dogs there is some evidence that we can reduce the severity of discomfort in affected dogs by mildly reducing the amount of calories and calcium/phosphorous minerals in their diets during the rapid bone growth phase of 4-10 months of age. To take advantage of this finding special types of puppy diet are now available for "large breed dogs".

Sadly, Hip Dysplasia continues to be a very common canine problem. But hopefully, by using good breeding practices, we can reduce the incidence of Hip Dysplasia in future canine generations. Fortunately, for those dogs that are affected, your veterinarian has many options to help control the pain and disability caused by this tragic disease.