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Hypothyroidism

Hypothyroidism is the clinical condition caused by deficiency of thyroid hormone. The thyroid hormones (thyroxine, T4 and triiodothyronine, T3) are produced by the thyroid glands, which are located in the neck on either side of the trachea (windpipe). Thyroid hormones are critically involved with the metabolism of most of the organs in the body. A deficiency results in a decreased metabolic rate, which may cause a wide variety of symptoms. Hypothyroidism generally affects middle-aged to older animals. It is very rare for dogs less than two years of age to be hypothyroid. It can occur in any breed but most commonly in Golden Retrievers, Irish Setters, Doberman Pinschers, Cocker Spaniels, Boxers, Shetland Sheepdogs, Poodles, Miniature Schnauzers and Old English Sheepdogs.

Clinical Signs

Clinical signs will vary from dog to dog, can affect multiple organ systems and are usually gradual in onset. The most common symptoms are: Lethargy, listlessness, mental depression, exercise intolerance, weight gain, seeking warm places to rest, hair loss of the tail, pressure points and truncal region, dry or oily skin, darkening of the skin, infections of the skin, infertility, slow heart rate, seizures and dragging of feet when walking. A dog with hypothyroidism may have only one or may have several of the above symptoms.

Diagnosis

The most common method used to diagnose hypothyroidism is to measure blood levels of the various thyroid hormones. Decreased thyroid hormone levels are usually indicative of hypothyroidism, however there is not one test that is 100% accurate. Because of this inaccuracy it is often necessary to evaluate several different thyroid tests (T4, free T4, TSH, T3) to make the diagnosis. It is very important to be aware that other non-related diseases and medications can cause falsely low levels of thyroid hormones in animals that are not hypothyroid.

Treatment

Dogs with hypothyroidism are easily treated with synthetic thyroid hormone supplement (l-thyroxin, T4) usually administered twice daily. Since there can be significant variation in absorption and metabolism of the thyroid hormone supplement from dog to dog, it is recommended to measure blood levels of T4 supplement one month after initiating therapy to insure that the dosage is correct. Once the proper dosage has been established once yearly blood checks are recommended to insure continued adequate supplementation. Improvement of clinical signs can occur within one week of initiating therapy for mentation or take several months for hair regrowth. Lifelong thyroid hormone supplementation is required for all dogs with a confirmed diagnosis of hypothyroidism.

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2

WHEAT RIDGE

3695 Kipling St., Wheat Ridge, CO 80033
Tel 303-424-3325 ● Fax 303-420-8360

WESTMINSTER

945 W 124th Av, Westminster, CO 80234
Tel 303-424-3325 ● Fax 303-420-8360

BOULDER

1658 30th ST, Boulder, CO 80301
Tel 303-424-3325 ● Fax 303-420-8360