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DEGENERATIVE MYELOPATHY

Degenerative Myelopathy (DM) is a progressive disease of the spinal cord that closely resembles the human form of a similar genetic mutation, Lou Gehrig's disease (also known as ALS). ALS often starts in the thoracic spinal cord and progresses to affect the entire central nervous system.

Degenerative Myelopathy is a disease that is most common in older medium to large breed dogs; German shepherds, Boxers, Pugs and Corgis are the most commonly affected breeds, but can be seen in other breeds as well. Affected dogs are normally older than 8 years old with an average age of 9 years.

DM is a non-painful disease with a very slow progression of weakness. **DM** initially affects the rear limbs. You may also notice muscle loss, decreased coordination, loss of balance, difficulty transferring from lying down or sitting to standing, and/or an inability to climb stairs, jump into the car, or onto furniture.

There is genetic testing available for **DM** with DNA testing for the genetic mutation of SOD1-A dismutase. Dogs at risk or affected with **DM** will have 2 copies of this recessive genetic mutation. MRI can also be performed to rule-out any other disease that could be causing spinal cord dysfunction.

As the disease progresses you will begin to see worsening signs of weakness with knuckling and dragging the hindlimbs on the ground, which may cause wearing of the nails and abrasions of the paws.

Over time this usually progresses to complete paralysis. Urinary and/or fecal incontinence occur very late in the course of the disease along with potentially the front limbs becoming weak and a hoarseness or loss of their bark.

Unfortunately, there is no cure for **DM**. Daily physical therapy has been shown to help maintain mobility and strength and improve survival time. Modalities that could be considered include underwater treadmill, hydrotherapy, and acupuncture. Special considerations may need to be taken for mobility such as front and back harnesses (Help'em up harness) or a cart (Eddie's Wheels) for mobility; booties to protect their paws (Pawz); along with bladder care/expression. Our Rehabilitation team at UVS is available to help with harness and cart fittings along with all of the physical therapy modalities listed above.

Sadly, the prognosis for **DM** is poor. Without intervention most dogs will become paralyzed within 12 months. Once the disease has progressed to the front limbs, patients may also start having symptoms of difficulty breathing and/or swallowing. At this stage of the disease, end-of-life care and euthanasia are recommended.

