

Syringomyelia

Syringomyelia is condition which can occur in Cavaliers King Charles Spaniels (and a number of other breeds). In recent months it has received a lot of worldwide attention and publicity in the media and on the internet. Along with the facts, a lot of misinformation has been published and broadcast, and has caused a lot of unnecessary worry and panic amongst pet owners. This has been aggravated by the fact that many Vets have not had any previous experience with Syringomyelia and are also learning about it. Some reports are suggesting that the problem is very common in Cavaliers but breeders who have been closely involved with the breed for many years know that this is not so.

What is Syringomyelia?

Syringomyelia (SM) is an extremely serious condition in which fluid-filled cavities develop within the spinal cord. It occurs in humans as well as in dogs. In dogs affected with SM it is thought that a malformation in the back half of the skull may allow a small part of the brain to protrude through a hole, thus blocking the flow of cerebrospinal fluid down the spinal cord and causing the SM condition. It is believed to be an inherited condition.

Symptoms

The majority of dogs affected by SM will show symptoms between 6 months and 3 years of age but symptoms can develop at any age.

Symptoms of SM can vary widely but severe pain is the most important clinical sign. The first sign is often a hypersensitivity in the dog's neck area, which gives it an uncontrollable urge to scratch excessively at or near its neck and shoulders. The dog may also seem to be overly sensitive to being touched around the head, neck and shoulders. Symptoms can progress until the dog experiences severe pain around its head, neck, and shoulders, causing it to yelp or scream.

In severe cases of SM a portion of the dog's spinal cord is destroyed, and the resulting pain may cause the affected dog to contort its neck and even sleep and eat only with its head held high. The dog's legs may become progressively weaker, making walking increasingly difficult.

Progression of the disease is variable. Not all dogs with SM have clinical signs and some may never show any signs, depending on the severity of the condition.

Diagnosis

The only accurate way of diagnosing SM is through the use of magnetic resonance image (MRI) scanning. This is an extremely costly procedure and there are very few MRI scanners available for use with animals. An MRI image will allow a veterinary neurologist to study the spine and diagnose the presence of any abnormality which might obstruct the flow of the cerebrospinal fluid.

Treatment

Treatment options for SM are very limited and they do not cure the problem. Drugs can help to reduce the pain and symptoms but they cannot reduce the deterioration, and long term use of many of these drugs is not advisable.

Surgery to allow the cerebrospinal fluid to flow normally may be necessary to reduce the pain and deterioration. However, such surgeries are expensive and technically difficult and they are not always successful. Following surgery many dogs still show signs of pain and others have a recurrence of the problem.

Foot Note

Scratching at the neck and shoulders and sensitivity in this area are also symptoms of other, more common ailments, including ear infections, ear mites and other ear problems, skin conditions and allergies, problems with the teeth, fleas, and spinal or disk problems.

If you have any concerns about your Cavalier please contact your Cavalier's breeder or one of the Cavalier Club committee members.

