

EPILEPSY

Epilepsy refers to a condition resulting in recurrent fits or seizures (convulsions) which arise from a non-progressive brain disorder. However definitions of epilepsy vary. For example one is "any condition in which seizures occur". Using this definition recurrent fits resulting from a severe blow on the head can be described as epilepsy. It is less confusing if the term is reserved for a series of fits resulting from an abnormality in the brain which, on investigation, is found not to be progressive.

What are the causes?

- Some brain disorders are genetically determined. This is Inherited Epilepsy.
- Some cases can be the result of a previously progressive condition which has healed but has left the brain in a "seizure prone" condition. An example is the dog that has had a blow on the head, which responded to treatment but has left the dog with sufficient brain injury that periodically there is seizuring. This is known as Acquired Epilepsy.
- Sometimes the results of all the tests carried out on the fitting dog prove to be normal and no explanation can be given for the seizures. This is Idiopathic Epilepsy

Is Idiopathic Epilepsy inherited?

Many types of idiopathic epilepsy appear to be more common in certain strains and thus may be inherited. Conversely, it is common to find that dogs considered to have Inherited Epilepsy often show no abnormality following extensive clinical examination and tests. It is not uncommon to find that inherited and idiopathic epilepsy are terms that are used synonymously. It is important however to be aware that not all cases of Idiopathic epilepsy are inherited and vice-versa.

My dog has had two fits. Does this mean he is epileptic?

Not necessarily. It is important to differentiate between fits and epilepsy (See handout Seizures). Sometimes a dog will have a seizure and without any treatment recover and never have another one. Epilepsy refers to the condition of recurrent fits.

I thought that was status epilepticus?

Status epilepticus describes the condition when the dog goes from one fit into another without regaining consciousness. Status epilepticus can result in brain damage. It is a life threatening condition that requires urgent veterinary treatment.

When Epilepsy is diagnosed is it imperative to treat with anticonvulsants?

This depends on many factors, two of which are seizure frequency and severity. Anticonvulsant therapy is not without side effects, also it is important that once started it is never stopped abruptly. In consequence although clusters of fits may have occurred, if these are mild, alternative therapies may be employed before specific anticonvulsant therapy is prescribed.

Is Epilepsy curable?

Some dogs do appear to recover spontaneously but this is rare. Often the condition can be very successfully controlled with anticonvulsive therapy but most dogs are epileptic for the rest of their lives. With close co-operation between the vet and the owner and regular monitoring most dogs are able to enjoy a normal of life.

Phenobarbitone

Phenobarbitone (trade name Epiphen) is one of the most common treatments prescribed. In severe cases it can be used along with potassium bromide (Epilease)

Phenobarbitone is a very effective anticonvulsant, however it is relatively easy to overdose and cause liver damage. It is therefore very necessary to monitor levels of phenobarbitone in the bloodstream every three months with a simple blood test.

If your dog is on a high dose of phenobarbitone, it is also necessary to monitor for liver damage. This can be done from the same blood test as used to monitor phenobarbitone levels

If damage to the liver is detected, it is important to assess how well the liver is functioning and coping with the high dose of phenobarbitone. To make this measurement, your dog will need to be admitted starved to the surgery. The surgery will then take a blood test, feed your dog then take another blood test two hours later. This will measure how well the liver deals with processing the food absorbed and hence how well it is working.

Alternative therapy may be necessary if the high doses of phenobarbitone required to control seizures is damaging your dog's liver.