

# DEGENERATIVE MYELOPAHTY

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## What is it?

Degenerative myelopathy of dogs is a slowly progressive, non-inflammatory degeneration of the white matter of the spinal cord. It is most common in German Shepherds and Welsh Corgis, but is occasionally recognized in other breeds. The cause is unknown, although genetic factors are suspected. Affected dogs are usually greater than 5 years old and develop non-painful weakness of the pelvic limbs that causes an unsteady gait. Early cases may be confused with orthopedic injuries; however, proprioceptive deficits (unawareness of where its limbs are in space) are an early feature of degenerative myelopathy and are not seen in orthopedic disease. Signs slowly progress to paraplegia over 6-36 months, although severity of signs may fluctuate. MRI or CSF analysis are performed to rule out other causes of spinal cord dysfunction.

## How is it treated?

Treatment with aminocaproic acid, vitamin supplements, and exercise has been recommended, but the safety and efficacy of these treatments has not been documented. Physical therapy, acupuncture, or supportive casts/braces may be beneficial.

## What is the prognosis for degenerative myelopathy?

The long-term prognosis is poor and most animals are euthanized within 6 months to 3 years of diagnosis, as the disease progresses to the point of permanent paraplegia. When the patient can no longer walk, and mobility carts are not an option, long-term hospice care or euthanasia should be considered. A personalized treatment plan is important to slow the progression of degenerative myelopathy. Talk to your veterinarian regarding the best treatment protocol for your pet.

## What symptoms can present as the disease progresses?

### Early Stages

- Progressive weakness of the hind limbs
- Worn nails
- Difficult rising
- Stumbling
- Knuckling of the toes
- Scuffing hind feet
- Wearing of the inner digits of the rear paws
- Loss of muscle in the rear legs
- Tremors of the rear legs

### Late Stages

- Persistent early stages
- Urinary and fecal incontinence
- Eventual front leg weakness from compensatory strain
- Mental stress/anxiety
- Pressure sores on bony prominences
- Inability to rise
- Muscle atrophy
- Poor hygiene-soiled appearance
- Pneumonia
- Depression
- Infection/sepsis
- Constipation
- Organ failure

### Crisis – Immediate veterinary assistance needed regardless of disease

- Difficulty breathing
- Prolonged seizures
- Uncontrollable vomiting/diarrhea
- Sudden collapse
- Profuse bleeding – internal or external
- Crying/whining from pain\*

*\*It should be noted that most animals will instinctually hide their pain. Vocalization of any sort that is out of the ordinary for your pet may indicate that their pain and anxiety has become too much for them to bear. If your pet vocalizes due to pain or anxiety, please consult with your tending veterinarian immediately.*

## Common Signs of Pain

Panting, lameness, difficulty sleeping, pacing, abnormal posture, body tensing, poor grooming habits, tucked tail, dilated pupils, licking sore spot, muscle atrophy, decreased appetite, vocalizing/yowling, reclusive behavior, aggressive behavior, avoiding stairs/jumping, depressed, unable to stand.