



Library Article

Vestibular Disease

VetSpeak by Linda Aronson, DVM

Old dog vestibular disease is a rather wonderful disease to diagnose as everyone expects the worst and being able to give good news makes a nice change! Old dog vestibular disease is a bit of a puzzler. We don't really know the cause, the good news is that if this is the problem the Bearded should be returned to normal within 2 or 3 weeks. Stress or anesthesia can cause a recurrence, usually mild of the symptoms, either on the same or opposite side, but in general this is a once off, and may never happen again.

It's thought that the cause is a disturbance of the flow of the fluid in the semicircular canals in the ear. There's a horizontal and vertical one, I always think they function rather like that little bubble in the spirit level to tell you where your head is in space. Having a set in each ear you can fix your head position in stereo. While the vestibulocochlear nerve (the one to and from the ear) may be inflamed, or the receptors in the lining of the canals malfunctioning this is thought to be less likely. One thing that is sure is that this isn't really a stroke. It is not a problem with the central nervous system nor is it a problem with loss of blood circulation.

However, it does have a sudden onset, the dogs lose their balance and are therefore reluctant to stand up. Usually only one side of the body is affected and this results in a head tilt directed towards the side where the problem is. Abnormal eye movements (nystagmus) are also seen. Nausea and vomiting may precede the other signs or accompany them. The only real rule out, unless the dog's been exposed to drugs that could damage her ears, is infection of the middle or inner ear, but in older dogs (ten or over) old dog vestibular disease is more likely.

Because the dog would get better by itself, treatment is supportive. Fluids to rehydrate and maintain volume due to vomiting and/or reluctance to eat; sedation if the dog is very disoriented is occasionally needed; diphenhydramine or a similar antiemetic may be helpful if they continue to vomit; antibiotics only if ear infection can't be ruled out; **NO STEROIDS**. The dog should be ready to go home once she can get around again without falling over and is eating and drinking. Having her at the vet's for a while is a good idea, mostly because they can monitor her kidney function, which can be a bit iffy with these older dogs especially if they're receiving subcutaneous or intravenous fluids.



Library Article

What to expect: Within 72 hours the dog should appear clinically better, vomiting should have stopped, she should be showing less difficulty walking and the abnormal eye movements should be diminishing. Over the next 7 to 10 days, walking and head tilt continue to improve. If this doesn't occur then the initial diagnosis was probably incorrect. In 2 to 3 weeks she should be as good as new.

A scary thing to experience, but a very nice thing to be able to diagnose, because it has a happy ending.