

Vestibular Syndrome

by Donna S. Baker

Vestibular syndrome is a medical condition that all owners of senior or middle-aged dogs should become familiar with. I learned about this condition the hard way when my first Golden Retriever, Eliza, was about twelve. Arriving home one Friday after work, I found her and my other Golden, Bailey, waiting for me near the front door. Bailey hopped up to greet me but Eliza remained lying down. She'd had some weakness in her back end for a while and sometimes needed a boost up, so I wasn't particularly worried. As I helped her to her feet, however, I could see that she was more than just a little weak. No sooner was she on all fours than her whole body listed to one side and she slumped to the floor, unable to stand. With panic starting to fill my chest, I tried again...same result. A stroke, I thought, or something gone terribly wrong with her back legs.

My first call was to the pet sitter who took the dogs out daily while I was at work – he assured me all had been perfectly fine at noontime. My second call was to the emergency clinic (fortunately, I live within five minutes of a very good one), telling them I was on the way with a dog that couldn't stand or walk. I carried her to the car and off we sped to get help.

At the clinic, the emergency vet examined Eliza and pointed out two additional symptoms I hadn't noticed: her head was tilted to one side and her eyeballs were moving rapidly side to side – a condition called nystagmus. Along with her falling over and inability to stand, the vet told me, these were classic symptoms of “idiopathic peripheral vestibular syndrome” (also sometimes called geriatric vestibular disease) – a disorder that severely affects the dog's balance and coordination. Eliza hadn't had a stroke and her legs were fine, said the vet, but her “vestibular apparatus” wasn't working properly and as a result she was very wobbly and dizzy ...kind of like a bad case of sea sickness.

The vestibular apparatus, as I later read, is made up of nerves that connect the brain and the inner ear. Its function is to help us perceive our orientation relative to the earth, i.e., whether we are standing up straight, falling over, upside down, etc., and then to communicate this information to our eyes and extremities. When trouble occurs in the vestibular system, it typically results in “ataxia” – an overall lack of coordination and balance. (This is often referred to as “vertigo” in humans.)

In older and middle-aged dogs, I also learned, such problems with the vestibular system typically come on suddenly and with no known reason, hence the term “idiopathic.” As with Eliza, the dog can appear perfectly normal until just before the acute symptoms make their appearance.

Back at the clinic, I asked how this condition was treated and how long Eliza would have to stay in the hospital. To my amazement (and dismay), I was told that no treatment was necessary, and that I could take her home to recuperate. “Take her home???” I remember asking in disbelief. “But she can't walk!” The vet assured me that in most

cases, vestibular syndrome resolves on its own within about two weeks and the dog only requires supervision and supportive nursing care. If no improvement is seen within or after two weeks, however, it could mean that something more serious might be causing the symptoms: an inner ear infection, for instance, or cancer of the cerebellum (part of the brain). Although the emergency vet who saw Eliza did not prescribe any medication, some veterinarians do treat this condition with antibiotics and steroids just in case it's the result of an inner ear infection or inflammatory process. And for some dogs, nausea may accompany the syndrome – in these cases, Bonine (an over the counter medication) often relieves some of the queasiness associated with the “motion sickness.”

Still skeptical, and quite apprehensive, I took Eliza home and made her as comfortable as possible. She didn't seem in any pain or even that anxious, which gave me some measure of comfort. As you can imagine, however, the compromised mobility of a dog with vestibular syndrome does create some definite challenges; in my case, the biggest problem was getting my poor girl out to potty.

I lived in a condominium complex at the time and Eliza was used to being walked in certain areas designated for doggie use. She was an exceptionally clean dog and although I put towels under her in case she needed to relieve herself, I knew she'd have to be in extreme distress before she would “go” in the house – obviously I didn't want her to get to that point. I was able to carry her to a small patch of grass right outside my front door, but that not being her regular potty area all she did was lie there and look forlorn. By early Saturday afternoon I was getting desperate. I knew if I could get her to a spot she associated with relieving herself, she'd go in minute, but the closest one was at the far end of a long parking lot – way too far for me to safely carry her. As I stood looking at her lying on the grass, my car parked just in front of her, the light bulb finally went off. I opened the door to the car, picked Eliza up and gently placed her inside, then drove the length of the parking lot to her “legitimate” potty area. Voila! We had success, though at least one of my neighbors thought I had really gone off the deep end.

Amazingly, by Sunday morning Eliza was able to totter to her feet and – with me guiding her – kind of half walk, half stagger her way to the front door. Yes, she looked like she'd had way too many cocktails, but given her original degree of impairment Friday night, I was thrilled! She made steady improvement from that point forward, and within a week or so was back to normal. The only evidence of the vestibular syndrome was a residual head tilt, which – as in many cases – took several weeks to finally go away (but did not seem to bother her in the least). In some cases, the head tilt can remain permanently.

My sweet Eliza lived to age fourteen, and would be glad to think her bout with vestibular syndrome might help another dog's owner know what to do. Should your older dog experience the sudden onset of any incoordination, dizziness, falling over, head tilt, or back and forth eye movements, get to a vet as quickly as possible for evaluation. While vestibular syndrome can be distressing for dogs (and their owners!), it generally has a very good prognosis.

Here are some online resources for further information:

Encyclopedia of Canine Veterinary Medical Information
(www.vetinfo.com/dencyclopedia/devestib.html)

Mar Vista Animal Medical Center (www.marvistavet.com/html/vestibular_disease.html)

PetPlace.com (www.petplace.com/articles/artShow.asp?artID=2665)

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