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Gall bladder mucocoele in dogs

The gall bladder is a sac like structure that stores bile and is located between the liver lobes. The liver produces bile which is stored in the gall bladder until the dog has a meal, at which point the bile is expressed into the duodenum (the first part of the small intestine, just after the stomach) where it is crucial for a number of normal digestive and regulatory processes.

Cholecystectomy is the technical term for removal of the gall bladder. This procedure is most commonly performed in dogs for a condition termed 'gall bladder mucocoele'. The cause of the condition is not currently known, but it is more common in certain breeds (especially Border Terriers, Shetland Sheepdogs and Miniature Schnauzers). The gall bladder wall starts to produce thick mucin and this thickens the bile first into a thick sludge and later to an almost solid jelly consistency. The gall bladder and the duct to the duodenum fill up with thick solid bile and the bile fails to flow effectively. Clinical signs include intermittent loss of appetite, abdominal pain, drinking more water than usual, nausea/vomiting and jaundice. The diagnosis is usually made using an ultrasound scan as well as investigations for some other diseases that may occur together with gall bladder mucocoele (hypothyroidism and hyperadrenocorticism). Once the diagnosis is made, medical treatment may be tried for mildly affected cases, but ultimately removal of the gall bladder should be considered as the potential complications associated with gall bladder rupture are severe. Dogs on medical management should have regular repeat ultrasound examinations to check the gall bladder is not likely to rupture.

Removal of the gall bladder in the dog is currently mostly performed through open abdominal surgery. Removal of the gall bladder via keyhole surgery is possible, however it is not possible to be 100% sure without an open surgery, that the bile is draining properly once the gall bladder has been removed and often keyhole surgery involves a longer anaesthetic. Cholecystectomy involves removal of the gall bladder and flushing the ducts with saline to ensure that they are open and draining freely. Once the gall bladder is removed, the liver continues to produce bile and it drains continuously into the duodenum. This means that the dog will not be able to tolerate high fat content food (such as human food, gravy, roast meat trimmings, marrow, dog treats etc), but will be able to digest normal dog food adequately.

Removal of the gall bladder in a dog that is currently well, is associated with a good prognosis and a rapid recovery, but emergency surgery for gall bladder disease is much higher risk and the mortality rate following emergency surgery for a ruptured gall bladder is up to 40%.

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