

## **Owner Information Sheet – *Idiopathic facial paralysis***

### **Background**

Facial paralysis results from damage to the facial nerve, which is the seventh of twelve cranial nerves (CN-VII). Idiopathic facial paralysis is the most common cause of facial paralysis in the dog, and may account for up to 75% of all cases.

A similar condition is seen in humans, which is called Bell's Palsy.

### **Clinical signs (symptoms)**

The facial nerve is responsible for controlling the muscles of the eyelids, lips, nose, ears and cheeks. When this nerve is damaged, the face can appear frozen or droopy as a result of an inability to move these facial muscles. Affected animals will be unable to blink, the ear and lips may droop on the affected side and they may show excessive drooling. Occasionally, a lack of tear production will also be seen, resulting in a dry eye, inflammation of the eye (conjunctivitis) and potentially ulceration of the surface of the eye. Generally, these clinical signs are only seen on one side of the face, but occasionally both sides are affected at the same time. In other cases, the opposite side of the face may subsequently become affected at a later date, even if the previous signs have resolved.

As the nerve for balance runs in close association with the facial nerve, many dogs with idiopathic facial nerve paralysis will also show mild balance problems, such as a head tilt and incoordination (appearing 'drunk') when walking. However, it is important that other causes for facial paralysis and balance loss are also considered in these cases (e.g. middle ear infection, brain problem).

### **Cause and diagnosis**

The underlying cause of idiopathic facial paralysis remains unknown, making this condition a diagnosis of exclusion. This means that other causes of facial paralysis have to be ruled out before reaching the final diagnosis. Other causes for facial paralysis include middle ear infections, hypothyroidism (low thyroid hormone levels), drug hypersensitivity (sulphonamides), cancer, brain lesions, and diseases affecting multiple nerves or muscles throughout the body.

Diagnostic investigations that can be performed to exclude the previously mentioned causes include external evaluation of the ear canal, blood tests, advanced imaging of the head (e.g. CT or MRI), cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) analysis and testing of the electrical activity of nerves and muscles (electrodiagnostics).

### **Treatment and prognosis**

There is no specific treatment for idiopathic facial paralysis. Your primary care veterinarian or veterinary neurologist will advise you about the necessary supportive treatment for your pet, which may include eye drops to reduce the risk of conjunctivitis and drying of the surface of the eye.

The prognosis for this condition is considered guarded in regards to recovery of function. Approximately 50% of the affected pets will recover the ability to move the face (either partially or fully), which may occur over weeks to months. Other pets will be left with permanent deficits but their overall quality of life is usually good if appropriate supportive treatment is administered. Close monitoring of the eye on the affected side is particularly important in these cases, as your pet may be unable to show signs of eye discomfort due to an inability to blink; if there is any suspicion of eye disease then this should be addressed immediately.

If you have any concerns about your dog or their treatment then please do not hesitate to contact your vet.

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The Granary, Bunstead Barns, Poles Lane,  
Hursley, Winchester, Hampshire, SO21 2LL.

Tel: 01962 767920 Fax: 01962 775909

Email: [info@andersonmoores.com](mailto:info@andersonmoores.com)

[www.andersonmoores.com](http://www.andersonmoores.com)

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