

Neurology

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Owner Information Sheet – *Steroid responsive meningitis-arteritis*

Background

Steroid responsive meningitis-arteritis (SRMA) is an ‘immune-mediated’ or ‘auto-immune’ condition that is relatively common in young dogs. An immune-mediated disease occurs when the patient’s own immune system starts to inappropriately attack part of their own body, causing inflammation at that site.

Steroid responsive meningitis-arteritis causes inflammation of the arteries (blood vessels) in the membrane covering the spinal cord (the meninges). Sometimes other areas of the body can also be affected, such as the joints.

Cause

We are not normally able to establish why an animal develops an immune-mediated disease. A complex interaction of genetics and the animal’s environment probably contribute to the development of this condition. An infection is not associated with this condition and it is not contagious.

SRMA is recognised most commonly in young dogs (<2 years of age) of certain breeds, including Beagles, Boxers, Bernese mountain dogs and Weimaraners, although dogs of any breed can be affected.

Clinical signs (symptoms)

The main clinical signs of SRMA are spinal pain and an elevated temperature – this pain is usually most severe in the neck but can also be present in the lower back. Inflammation can also affect other parts of the body – typically the joints. Swollen joints can cause a stiff and stilted way of walking.

Diagnosis

A diagnosis of SRMA is normally made on the basis of excluding other causes of spinal pain, with blood tests and in some cases x-rays or advanced imaging (e.g. an MRI scan). A cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) sample is also collected from the neck or lower spine (or both) under general anaesthesia. The demonstration of inflammation and the presence of a specific type of inflammatory cell in the CSF facilitates a presumptive diagnosis. Although infection is very unlikely, we normally run a panel of tests to exclude this possibility.

Treatment

The mainstay of treatment for SRMA is suppression of the immune system with drugs such as prednisolone. The administration of steroids by injection or orally very often results in significant and rapid improvement of the clinical signs. The dose is then reduced slowly over the course of several months until the stimulus for the immune system has gone.

Unfortunately, side effects are often seen with steroid use. Common dose-dependent side effects of steroids include increased thirst and hunger (consequently increased urination and weight gain), lethargy, panting, and increased risk of infections (respiratory, urinary, etc).

Occasionally, additional medications are required, either to aid suppression of the immune system, or to allow us to reduce the steroids dose without fear of relapse. Most of the second-line drugs are technically 'chemotherapy' drugs – but it should be noted that we use them at relatively low and safe levels, and side effects are rare. Your veterinary neurologist or primary care veterinarian will discuss with you what side effects may be expected with the medications.

Prognosis

The prognosis for SRMA is generally good, with most patients improving after 2-3 days of treatment and entering clinical remission within 2 weeks.

Treatment with steroids is normally required for several months, after which treatment can be stopped and a normal length and quality of life can be expected.

Relapses of SRMA are possible either during the course of treatment or after treatment has been stopped. Roughly 30% of the patients with SRMA will relapse. If a relapse occurs, the clinical signs will be similar or identical to the original syndrome. Normally, a relapse can be successfully treated using the same medications as previously.

Occasional visits to your veterinarian may be required during the course of treatment. Your veterinarian may suggest blood tests every few months to assess the function of organs that may be affected by treatment. How often this is required will be dependent on the individual's response to treatment.

If you have any concerns about your dog or their treatment, do not hesitate to contact your veterinarian.

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