

Tracheal Collapse in Dogs

The trachea is the windpipe through which dogs-and all of us-breathe. It is a tube that is held open with circular rings of cartilage, just like rings that hold up the play tunnels through which young children crawl. When those rings break down and can no longer hold the windpipe open, it will collapse the trachea, just like a paper straw collapses when someone pulls too strongly when drinking. The condition is genetic, but not fully understood and often does not show up until middle age. It is more common in toy breeds, such as Yorkies, Poodles, Pomeranians and Maltese, as well as Pugs, Lhasa Apsos, Shih Tzus and Chihuahuas. However, it can show up in any breed at any age.

Signs & Symptoms

In a case of tracheal collapse, a pet owner will hear a harsh, honking cough emanating from the dog, which appears to be trying to cough something up, as if there is an object caught in his throat. However, there is no object; the irritation to the throat lining causes inflammation that produces that sensation. There also may be some gagging or vomiting of saliva and mucus that the throat secretes in an effort to soothe itself. Any exertion that causes more rapid breathing can cause the trachea to collapse. Unfortunately, pets often become scared and anxious, which causes them to breathe more rapidly, and it becomes a vicious cycle.

The best thing an owner can do is to hold and calm the pet until the breathing quiets and the dog begins to relax. The rapid breathing that results in the collapse and cough can be brought on by a number of factors-excitement,

exercise, eating or drinking too fast, irritation caused by cigarette or other smoke, dust or pollen, and heat or humidity. In addition, an overweight pet is much more at risk and will have more trouble recovering from episodes than a leaner pet.

What You Can Do

In addition to avoiding the risk factors discussed above, pet owners should ask their veterinarians about medical management. Radiographs or other tests may be required to definitively diagnose the problem and to see if there are any other medical issues that are complicating the problem, such as an enlarged heart or respiratory disease. Oftentimes, a dog with a collapsing trachea will not show any symptoms until another medical problem exacerbates the issue.

Lifestyle changes and medical treatment minimize the effect of tracheal collapse on a pet's quality of life and prevent the condition from shortening his lifespan. Simple choices, such as using a harness instead of a leash, avoiding vigorous activities, taking walks at times of day that are less hot and humid and avoiding exposure to smoke and other irritants can make a significant difference. Your veterinarian can prescribe cough suppressants to use as needed and possibly bronchodilators in certain cases. Cortisone for short periods of time, if needed, can reduce inflammation. Occasionally, antibiotics are given if a secondary infection has taken advantage of the situation.

Lower oxygen levels related to tracheal collapse have been shown to impact the liver negatively. Consequently, your veterinarian may wish to monitor a pet's liver values and prescribe liver supportive medication, as well.

Although there are surgeries to alleviate this condition, the overall success rate is poor for older dogs and dangerous for younger dogs. These procedures should only be attempted by a board certified surgeon after much discussion with the pet owner regarding dangers and expectations. The bottom line is that the condition will always be present and will likely progress as your pet ages, but by working with your veterinarian, you can minimize the problem and give your pet a great quality of life. Regular follow-ups combined with easy lifestyle changes and medical intervention as needed will keep your pet happy and enjoying life with you for a long time.