

Mid Hudson Animal Hospital

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Lyme Disease

The test we have done has revealed that your dog is infected with *Borellia burgoferi* the bacteria which causes Lyme disease in pets and people. Lyme disease is an acquired bacterial infection that was spread to your dog by the bite of an infected deer tick.

Symptoms of Lyme disease.

Fully half the dogs we see with Lyme disease have no symptoms whatsoever. It is only by testing the blood that we find these dogs harbor the bacteria that causes Lyme disease. Will they become ill tomorrow, next month, next year or never? We just don't know. What we do know is that the bacteria is dangerous and we need to destroy it before it cause harm.

The other half of the dogs we see with Lyme disease are quite ill. Many arrive at the office with a limp, a fever and are often very depressed. Since the illness comes on suddenly most owners think that their pets have twisted or pulled a muscle while they were running around. Some dogs are presented with so much muscle and joint pain that they actually refuse to walk. Those dogs often are carried into the office in their owners arms and yelp when they're asked to stand or even are touched. A few dogs have even more severe symptoms. Most of these severely affected dogs we see have kidney failure due to Lyme disease though a small number have heart disease or symptoms of injury to the brain.

Diagnosis of Lyme Disease

It can be difficult to arrive at a diagnosis of Lyme disease from symptoms alone. The symptoms one sees with cases of Lyme disease are also seen with many other types of illnesses in dogs. Injury during running, jumping and normal play can cause similar symptoms. However most other types of muscle injury are not accompanied by fever, do not cause pain in a number of different limbs at the same time and are not accompanied by depression. When we see a dog with a limp and a fever, until proven otherwise we make a tentative diagnosis of Lyme disease.

Until recently we had to start treatment of pets that we thought had Lyme disease without being sure that Lyme disease was their actual illness. That was because it took 5 days before the test for Lyme disease came back from the laboratory. If your dog didn't have Lyme disease we may have wasted almost a week before we could institute the proper treatment. Now we can help your pet right away. We now have a test that we can perform right here in the office and know within 10 minutes if the cause of your pet's problem is Lyme disease or just as importantly, if it's something else.

Treatment of Lyme disease

Luckily for our pets, most of the time Lyme diseased is much easier to cure than the disease is in human beings. Where many humans seem to get chronic Lyme disease infections that last for years, a properly treated dog will recover completely and unless infected again will never have

symptoms return. We treat your pet's Lyme disease by administering antibiotics for a month. Pain killing medication is often given for the first week as it takes as long as a week for the initial joint pain to go away. We use this pain medication because we want your pet to feel relief immediately and not have to wait and suffer for a few days until the antibiotics take effect. Treatment of most dogs takes place at home. Within as little as 24 hours, but certainly before three days have gone by your pet should be feeling much better. The relief of symptoms is often quite dramatic and it is heartwarming to see your stiff, painful pet returned to his happy frolicking self. It is very important to continue the antibiotics until they're completely finished. Even though the symptoms may have gone, the bacteria are still spreading throughout your pet's body. If you stop the antibiotics as soon as the symptoms have disappeared you run the risk of leaving some living bacteria. If all the bacteria are not killed a relapse will occur which may be impossible to completely cure. That's one of the main reasons a dog will get chronic lyme disease and suffer for years with the illness.

If your pet has symptoms of kidney involvement, his prognosis is much worse. Regardless of treatment, most dogs with the kidney form of Lyme disease die from the illness. That doesn't mean we won't try to help your pet. He might be one of the fortunate dogs who survives when Lyme disease attacks his kidneys. Dogs whose kidneys are affected stay in the hospital for a few days and receive powerful drugs through an intravenous line (an IV). After a few days dogs that show signs of improvement can go home to be treated in a familiar environment.

Prevention of Lyme disease

Preventing Lyme disease requires a two pronged approach. The first and most important part is vaccination. Your pet needs to receive an initial two vaccine series. The vaccines are given two to four weeks apart. Each year your dog will need to get a single booster injection. The Lyme vaccine is excellent, we all wish there was one available for human beings. However as good as it is it still does not provide one-hundred percent protection. Therefore the second step for preventing Lyme disease in your pet is to make sure you keep your pet free of ticks. That might mean using a special collar to kill ticks or a spot-on medication that will repel ticks. Feel free to ask us for our advice for this important item. Remember the vaccine alone won't fully protect your pet.

Your Pet's Future

It is very unusual for a properly treated pet to acquire chronic Lyme disease. Ninety-five percent of the cases of Lyme disease that we see are completely cured after a four week regiment of antibiotics. These dogs go on to live a perfectly normal life, they suffer no residual signs, and do not relapse. However if they are exposed to Lyme disease bearing ticks, they can get Lyme disease again. The other 5 percent develop kidney, heart or brain disease. Some dogs with these symptoms can also be cured but must be treated much more vigorously, including intravenous medication in the hospital. Others with these symptoms die despite the most intensive treatment.

Unlike many other disease your dog does not build up a lifetime immunity after being infected. Therefore, to keep your dog healthy for the rest of its life you will need to bring him in for a Lyme disease booster vaccine every year. And, don't forget...your pet needs tick control too!