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CHRONIC PANCREATITIS IN COCKER SPANIELS: Information sheet

As a result of studies at Cambridge, we have found that some Cocker spaniels suffer from an unusual form of chronic pancreatitis. This results in bouts of sickness, diarrhoea and abdominal pain and, in some dogs, the development of diabetes mellitus. We are collecting clinical details and blood samples from affected dogs to help us do further genetic studies and find a better diagnostic test. We hope that the results of these studies will help us to diagnose and treat this condition in Cocker spaniels better in the future.

The pancreas is a small organ just behind the stomach which has two very important functions:

- Firstly, it produces enzymes which go down a duct in to the gut and are critical in the digestion of food. These enzymes are especially important for fat digestion. If they are deficient, the animal develops what is known as 'exocrine pancreatic insufficiency' (EPI) where they cannot digest fat properly so typically lose weight in spite of a ravenous appetite and have smelly, fatty faeces. This is treated relatively easily by feeding a low fat diet and adding enzymes to the food.
- Secondly, the pancreas produces a hormone called insulin which passes in the blood stream to all the organs in the body and is centrally important in the regulation of blood glucose levels and energy supply to the cells of the body. A deficiency of this hormone results in the development of DIABETES MELLITUS where the blood sugar level is very high and the animal drinks and urinates excessively. This is also relatively easily treated by giving the dog regular insulin injections and keeping daily food and exercise as stable as possible.

'Pancreatitis' means inflammation of the pancreas. This occurs when digestive enzymes are prematurely released in to the pancreas and literally start to digest it. This can obviously be very painful and often causes a focal form of peritonitis and pain. Affected dogs typically go off their food and often vomit and show some signs of stomach pain. They can also have a little blood on their faeces and straining. Some dogs have very few clinical signs at all. 'Acute pancreatitis' is short term and does not result in permanent scarring of the pancreas, but can be very serious. 'Chronic pancreatitis' means that this inflammation has been present for a long time and has produced some permanent scarring in the pancreas. Pancreatitis is relatively common in humans and dogs. In man, alcoholism and certain genetic conditions predispose to pancreatitis, but much is not understood about the disease. The causes in dogs are usually unknown, although we believe that Cocker spaniels suffer from an 'autoimmune' form of chronic pancreatitis where the duct is attacked. This often seems to occur at the same time as dry eye and, sometimes, anal sac disease and even hypothyroidism and immune-mediated kidney disease. We know in both dogs and man that the signs of the illness can vary widely from no signs at all to recurring abdominal pain and even, in severe cases, life-threatening shock and peritonitis (but this is very unlikely indeed in a dog with chronic disease). We also know that a small proportion of dogs (and humans) with chronic pancreatitis will eventually destroy enough of their pancreas to develop EPI and/or diabetes. They need to lose about 90% of their pancreas to do this so many dogs live with pancreatitis for their whole lives without developing these problems.

We are working on studies to develop a blood test which we hope will help us diagnose pancreatitis in Cocker spaniels more reliably. At the moment, the diagnosis is difficult and relies on a combination of blood test and ultrasound findings. Even then, some dogs are 'normal' on all tests and yet still have chronic pancreatitis.

If you think that your dog may have chronic pancreatitis, please consider taking him or her to your vet and asking them to contact me at Cambridge Veterinary School. We can then ask them if they would be willing to take some blood samples and post them a consent form for you to sign prior to taking these samples.

Health Questionnaire: Chronic pancreatitis in cocker spaniels

Is your dog a Kennel Club registered English cocker spaniel? *(If not, it will still be helpful for you to complete this questionnaire but we would like to know its pedigree status to help us analyse the results.)*

Has your dog ever been diagnosed by a vet with pancreatitis? If so, when.

Does your dog suffer from intermittent mild episodes of vomiting and/or diarrhoea and/or going off his or her food? If so, how often and what are the signs?

Has your dog had severe, acute gastroenteritis (rather than mild disease)? If so, when?

Does your dog have dry eye (keratoconjunctivitis sicca)?

Does your dog have anal sac problems? If so, please describe.

Does your dog have allergic skin disease? ('Atopy')?

Does your dog have, or has he/she ever had, any other autoimmune disease (such as hypothyroidism; hyperadrenocorticism; autoimmune haemolytic anaemia).

Does your dog have any other health problems diagnosed by your vet? (Kidney, liver or other diseases)

Would you be willing for us to contact you or your vet to gain more information to help in our study? If so, please could you give contact details. If not, we are happy for you to remain anonymous.

Any other comments

Thank you!