



Dementia in Dogs

Aged canines, like some aged people show signs of declining brain function. The four main signs of canine dementia are

- Disorientation – staring into space, getting lost in the home or yard, getting stuck in corners, standing at the wrong door or part of the door to go out.
- Loss of interaction with human family members - decline in greeting owners or soliciting attention, change in following owners (more or less) around the house
- Loss of house-training – start to urinate/defecate in the house without explanation (not due to incontinence or separation anxiety), reduced use of doggie door or not asking to go out to toilet.
- Impaired sleep-wake function – regularly wakes owner at night by pacing or vocalizing, sleeping less at night, sleeping more during the day.

Dementia is suspected in an aged dog exhibiting at least one of these signs more than once a week for at least a month. One study found that 28% of 11-12 year old dogs and 68% of 15-16 year old dogs were impaired in at least one category. Most dogs showing some signs were likely to become severely affected within 12-18 months.

In addition, aged canines can loose memory of learned behaviour although behaviours relating to finding food are not affected by age.

Dogs with dementia suffer a physical change within the brain that correlates with the degree of dysfunction. Like people, dogs with dementia also experience a slowing of the gait and cautious movement.

TREATMENT OF DEMENTIA

DIET

A fundamental mechanism contributing to dementia is oxidative damage and reduced mitochondrial function of parts of the brain. Diets enriched with anti-oxidants can delay and treat dementia.

Antioxidants include Vitamin E, Vitamin C, Alpha-lipoic acid, L-carnitine, beta-carotene and fruits and vegetables (eg spinach, grapes, carrots). Improvement in function can be seen 2-8 weeks after starting antioxidant therapy. Antioxidants also have anti-inflammatory properties. Omega 3 fatty acids are also helpful in the treatment of dementia. Hills made a prescription diet called Hills b/d (brain diet) which addresses these recommendations and is available through vets.

PHYSICAL THERAPY

The onset of dementia can be delayed or treated by stimulating brain function using basic obedience training, scent discrimination tasks (scented dumbbell retrievals), safety-modified obstacle courses and hide and seeks games with the owner, toys or treats. Exercise including walking helps delay loss of brain function as well as neuromuscular function. Exercise programs can be modified to account for other physical limitations. Swimming is a mode of exercise that imparts reduced stress on arthritic joints.

ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT

Brain function can also be improved in dogs with dementia by tactile stimulation (petting, brushing, massage), new toys, blinking lights, walks in new areas and increasing interaction with new smells, other animals and people.

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