

Elbow Dysplasia

What is it?

Elbow Dysplasia occurs when elbow joint has been damaged through either cartilage loss, the presence of medial coronoid fragments or and ununited anconeal process, vicious circle of inflammation and further cartilage damage begins. Ultimately this causes progressive arthritis of the elbow joint leading to pain and loss of function.



What causes it?

Elbow dysplasia is most often seen in large to giant breed dogs, particularly in Labradors, Golden retrievers, German Shepherds, Newfoundlands and Rottweilers, but can occur in most other breeds of dogs. Different breeds have predispositions to different forms of the disease. Ununited anconeal process is largely a problem in German Shepherds and Newfoundlands, medial compartment disease (medial coronoid injury) is seen in many other breeds of dogs. Sight hounds seem to free of the disease.

Signs & Symptoms

Dogs affected by elbow dysplasia often show signs from early age, typically from 5 months on, but some may first be diagnosed after 2-4 years. Affected dogs develop a front limp from lameness that worsens over a short period of time. Lameness is usually worse after exercise and typically never resolves itself with rest.

Often both fore legs are affected which can make detection of lameness difficult as the gait is not asymmetric. When both elbows are involved the dog usually become unwilling to exercise for long periods of time or in severe cases may even refuse to walk.

Aftercare and Outcome:

Obviously, the aftercare will depend on the type of surgery performed, and your veterinarian will advise you of exactly what is required. In general your dog need to quiet and confined for a period of time, usually 2-8 weeks or more.

The outcome will vary between dogs, but in general the more mild the case the disease the better long term outcome. Most dog will benefit from surgical treatment even the disease is more advanced, but unfortunately once arthritis is well established it will progress regardless of treatment. The aim is to slow progression of arthritis and prolong the patient's use of the elbow.

Early diagnosis and treatment is one of the main keys to control the development of arthritis.

Testing & Treatment

How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis of elbow dysplasia is usually performed with a combination of clinical examination and x-rays. Usually the dog has pain on fully bending or fully extending the elbow and often your veterinarian will want to watch your dog walk or trot to detect any lameness.

X-rays will typically show signs of arthritis but may also show the signs of small bone fragments in a ununited anconeal process. Your veterinarian may also choose to refer you to a specialist veterinary surgeon for more advanced diagnostic procedures to be performed. This may include CT scans, MRI scans or arthroscopy.

How is it treated?

Treatment depends on the severity of the disease in the elbow. In many cases surgery is recommended. The earlier the disease is diagnosed and treated the better results for the dog. Your veterinarian may recommend medical management of the problem by surgery. Treatment can be divided into the correction of the joint step between the radius and if present and treatment of any other joint damage. Often surgery is best performed arthroscopically, but conventional surgery can be an option also.

This information is not meant to be a substitute for veterinary care.

Always follow the instructions provided by your veterinarian.

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