

## BERNER U LECTURE 2016

### GENERAL CARE OF DM DOGS

A. Your dog has been tested and is found to be genetically "at risk" for DM. What can you do to help prevent/slow the disease progression/symptoms?

- If your dog is overweight at all, put him on a diet and get that extra weight off now – it will only get harder and almost impossible as the disease progresses and activity slows or comes to a standstill. Consult your vet about the dog's weight, and monitor it closely.
- Improve your dog's physical condition and core body strength so he will have the strength to pull himself up and improve balance
  - Walking
  - Swimming/underwater treadmills (get them used to this while they are still healthy so when they start having trouble they are used to this and not scared) ENSURE TOTALLY DRY AFTERWARDS
  - Wobble boards and other fitness devices – consult your vet and a pet physical therapist/rehab specialist and establish a routine (see resource guide for list)
  - Weight shifting exercises
  - Massage therapy
  - Passive exercise – stretching and strengthening exercises
  - NOTE: Research has proven that dogs who receive physical rehab remain ambulatory much longer than dogs who don't get rehab treatment, and this helps increase their survival time and quality of life. Please consult with a specialist, as each dog is different and needs different levels of rehab specific to him – too much can worsen the disease so great care must be taken in a rehab program
  - Key to maintain the quality of life and slowing disease progression is to keep the dog fit with regular exercise to maintain rear limb muscle tone. Range of motion exercises can also help maintain mobility for as long as possible. Hip, shoulder, spine massage and gentle manipulation will help maintain comfort.

B. Supplements – DISCUSS WITH YOUR VET – University of Florida for more information

- \* Vitamins C (1000-2000 mg/day)
- \* Vitamin E (1000-2000 mg/day)
- \* B-complex (hi potency 2/day or stress ones 1/day)
- \* Aminocaproic Acid – reference materials
- \* Others I've seen referenced are homeopathics such as ginseng, ginkgo, grape seed or pine bark extract, etc.... consult with an expert on these if you are interested. I haven't personally tried any of these.

C. Pain Management

She is  
Not a vet  
Not recommending  
anything.

**\*Often you hear that DM is not a “painful” disease, and this is totally not true! The pain can come from infection, falling, overextending ligaments or tendons in trying to walk or move around and not having complete balance, etc...!)**

- Acupuncture
- Chiropractic adjustments
- Chinese herbs
- Laser therapy
- Pharmaceuticals – NOTE: There is some discussion about long term use of NSAIDs in DM dogs. As one webinar veterinarian stated that I attended, the long term use is not a huge worry in DM dogs as they are not going to die long term of this usage – they will die because they are euthanized from other DM disease symptoms first, so keeping the dog pain free and happy is of utmost importance, so use of NSAID's should not be discouraged
- Nutraceuticals – Many are available – consult with your veterinarian or homeopath

**Steroids – Should be avoided as they cause loss of muscle mass which is inherent in this disease anyhow, therefore anything that exacerbates this should be avoided.**

#### **D: EQUIPMENT**

- Bedding
  - I like the Durawhelp puppy pads which are typically used in whelping boxes. They are thick, and have a rubber back which keeps it from slipping on the floor. They can dig their toes into these and pull themselves up and along without slipping.
  - I sometimes will put a Chucks pad (like the ones you buy at hospital supply stores and they use in nursing homes – they are square quilted pads with backing that prevents leakage into the Durawhelp pad and easy to wash and dry so you don't have to wash the big pad so often). You can sometimes buy these hospital pads used at dog shows that have been sterilized for a very low cost.
  - If your dog is still able to use a bed – there are several that have the therapeutic foam padding which can be easier on their joints and help prevent bedsores. However, as the disease progresses, these will be too high and they may trip trying to get on or off of them. Just be aware of this.
  - Be sure to move the dog and turn it often to reposition it regardless of the type of bedding you choose. DM dogs will get pressure sores and stiffness so moving them regularly and stretching their legs gently and massaging them each time you do it will keep them more comfortable. My current DM dogs lights up when I get out the vacuum cleaner and likes for me to use the hose and suck off the dust/hair/etc... I think it is like a massage for her when I am gently using it on her!
- Non-Skid Rugs
  - Important to keep dog from slipping and falling – use small rubber backed rugs and string them along. I use the smaller ones and use them in a line like stepping stones – the big



long ones are harder to wash and dry. Also, if they soil one of the little ones you just wash that one. You can also grab them and reposition them quickly if you need to as the dog is trying to move around.

- Yoga mats also can be used by entry doors if they are padded enough to help them keep from slipping as they come in and out. In later stages though, you will probably still need the rugs to give more traction.
- As the disease progresses maintaining skin integrity is of utmost importance. PLEASE be aware of the surfaces your dog will travel on :
  - Avoid asphalt/concrete as these can scrape up the dogs hind feet and legs by dragging on them – stay on the grass when possible during walks – use appropriate surfaces for your dog’s comfort – CHECK SKIN REGULARLY on Feet, between legs and down hind legs where they be damp and urine scalding may occur and KEEP CLEAN AND DRY!

**WATER AND FOOD BOWLS** – Get the bowls with rubber on the bottom to feed and water out of so they don’t scoot away from the dog as they eat or drink!

**PLEASE REMEMBER THAT YOUR DM DOG MAY NOT GET UP AND WALK OR SCOOT ACROSS ROOM TO WATER BOWL – MAY BE TOO MUCH EFFORT SO KEEP WATER WITHIN A FOOT OR TWO OF THEM AT ALL TIMES AND MAKE SURE THEY DRINK PLENTY – MONITOR STOOL AND IF HARD AS ROCKS CHANGE WHAT YOU ARE DOING – THEY ARE DEHYDRATED!** I soak food with warm water and add some canned food, and put the water bowl down on a chucks pad within a few inches of my dog.

#### **MAINTENANCE OF BODY TEMPERATURE**

- DM dogs have a VERY difficult time regulating their body temperature – they chill much more easily so if it’s cold outside, don’t leave them unattended. Bring them in quickly and if their teeth are chattering, cover them with a blanket and monitor body temperature
- They also DO NOT HANDLE HEAT well – be aware they can’t move out of the sun, and even ambient temperature can make them overheat quickly leading to heatstroke/death. Again, don’t leave outside unattended, and make sure water is right there and bring in quickly if warm at all outside. Keep ice packs in the freezer to put on their feet and abdomen in case they overheat and CALL THE VET IMMEDIATELY

#### **BOOTIES**

- There are many manufacturers of booties for dogs, and I have heard several that are recommended. I personally do NOT use the boots, as I find my DM dogs fought them, and because they weren’t used to them they actually caused them to fall more. Also, if you get them that fit tightly enough not to fall off as they drag their feet, this can actually cut down on the nerve sensation to the paws, and have a negative effect on nerve impulses going to the paws/hindquarters, which can make matters worse.

#### **CARTS**

- We've all seen the DM dogs in their pretty carts but in actuality, while they can serve a purpose for a time, they aren't always practical:
  - Can only be used outdoors – while small dogs can use indoors through doorways and halls and corners, Berners in carts are too long and big to get through most homes and around furniture
  - Dogs cannot urinate or defecate while in them
  - Dogs cannot lay down in them, so front legs get tired very fast
  - If you are going to use one, get the dog used to the harness, and even a draft cart before it gets to advanced stages so it isn't scared when you use the wheels
  - Measure the dog for the wheels while it is still healthy and able to stand as the measurements and fitting to the cart are very important. Trying to do it when the dog is down in it's rear end will make measuring and fitting more difficult.
  - Get on some of the DM lists – whether specific to Berners or the all breed ones (refer to resource list) as we all often "rehome" wheels when we have finished using them. They are very expensive and you won't use for long, so we try to pass them on and share them with others. Weight and measurements are important so while a German Shepherd set of wheels might work for a Berner, a Boxer set might not so be sure to ask questions.
  - Most Berner people like Eddie's Wheels the best. Please refer to resource list for all wheelchair companies.

#### VACCINES

- Most research recommends NOT doing annual vaccines – to titer test instead and vaccinate only for what is needed ([www.hemopet.com](http://www.hemopet.com) does titer testing). Rabies is required by law, but doing the other vaccines can even send a DM dog into a "downhill spiral".

#### HEARTWORM PREVENTATIVE

- Discuss with your vet, but one that is often recommended is "Filarbits plain". Westlab Pharmacy also makes a special heartworm preventative for DM Dogs (1-800-493-7852)

#### LIFTING AIDS

- Find one that works for BOTH YOU AND YOUR DOG! Be sure whatever aid you use, that your arms/wrists/hands are properly positioned – don't twist them. Make sure the height of the handles and angles works for your height/weight and lifting capabilities. It is easy to injure an arm/neck/back trying to lift and maneuver a DM dog. Towels can work, but you can't get a good handhold on them, so find a sling that works and USE IT!
  - Help 'Em Up (many people like but I found it hard to put on and off and my dogs found it to be confining. It was hard for me to lift the dog with two handles)
  - Sling from Fosters and Smith- on sale right now for about \$10 (I get the large one) – advantage is easy to slip under the dog and the handles are short enough to be height appropriate and easy to use
  - Other lift aids are available – research them and see what works best for your particular situation and physical abilities

*only applicable for a short time (few months?) shared around via groups*



EXCELLENT ARTICLE WITH RESOURCES LISTED - <http://www.iaamb.org/acwt/water-therapy/degenerative-myelopathy.html>

## **DECISION MAKING AND CARE OF THE OWNER AND FAMILY**

The time will eventually come when you have to make some decisions regarding the care giving for your dog, and what the best thing to do for both you/your family, and your dog is.

### **MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS**

#### **#1 – QUALITY OF LIFE FOR YOUR DOG – THIS INCLUDES YOUR QUALITY OF LIFE AS IT DIRECTLY RELATES TO YOUR DOG**

\*Remain calm at all times – when you are stressed your dog will sense it and become stressed and anxious. When, NOT If, the time comes you are stressing out more over the care and condition of your dog, it is decision making time.

\*Think of 3-5 things that give your dog a good quality of life and that are important to it – i.e. chasing a ball, going for a car ride, going for walks, etc..... Document positive things in your dog's life and your interaction each day. The ability to do these things will lessen as the disease progresses, but there may be other positives you can notate (i.e. for Dani it is having the vacuum run over her rather than a bath and blow out which used to be fun for her). Just look at the positives and the love in caring for your dog.

If you have stairs, and the dog hurts himself trying to get in and out and maneuvering the stairs, then consider that – also, injury to yourself or to family members in trying to get the dog in and out is also important – avoid injury to yourself.

This is a gradual disease process, and your caregiving will increase each day. You won't even really realize it as time goes by, and you keep increasing your care. All dogs are different in what they will allow you to do for them – my Yue gave up when he couldn't go out in his back yard any more, and I let him go with a couple of months. LeLe loved being waited on – she was totally paralyzed for over a year in her rear end and didn't go out at all and was totally happy. I expressed her bladder and bowels several times a day and that was fine with her. When the paralysis traveled up her ribcage and started affecting her front end and the organ infections were too recurrent, I let her go. My current DM dog (LeLe's full sister) doesn't want to be helped. While she can still get up and out, she won't let me help her and is terribly embarrassed when she has an accident. She won't get to the same stage of progression as LeLe as a result.

One thing every DM owner goes through is a feeling of guilt when trying to make the decision to euthanize their beloved friend. Every single one of us. This is because your dog is still bright of mind and soul, and doesn't usually show obvious pain, like we see in dogs with cancer, or orthopedic disease distress. You've given care to your invalid for so long, you feel like you have failed, and are giving up. **YOU ARE NOT!** There is a time where the quality of life, and the dignity of your dog, must be your first consideration, as well as taking care of yourself! A dog that dies from DM either suffocates, or starves, due to paralysis. Please **DO NOT** let your special friend get to this point. With love and careful thought, set him free of the constrictions of the physical body. Please call me if you need to talk through this – my cell is 859-321-8166. I will be there for you.

I encourage everyone to get a confirmed diagnosis which means doing a necropsy. Only by doing this can we further research in the disease. There is a list of facilities available from the BMDCA Health Committee, or email me and I will help you find one, as well as help you find someone to go with you if you need help doing this. My email is [berniersandbirds@aol.com](mailto:berniersandbirds@aol.com). University of Missouri will send out a kit if you want to submit a spine to them – again contact me and I can tell you how to access the information to get it to them. **PLEASE** plan in advance for what you want to do, so when the time comes to let your dog go, you already have everything in place – do it now. And most of all, put the information in Berner-Garde! I would also love to have a copy of your necropsy report. We do have someone who very probably in the immediate future will start collecting information on confirmed diagnoses to provide to researchers in the future on DM.

△ Your care giving gradually increases and you don't always realize what a state you've got to. Keep realistic.



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### GROOMING YOUR DM DOG

- A. Keep nails short!
- B. Keep hair cut off around the pads and on the bottom of the feet
- C. Cut hair off the insides of the rear legs to help keep that area dryer and ease cleaning
- D. Cut the feathers off the thighs in the back, and keep the hock hair trimmed short to ease cleaning/drying
- E. Keep hair in anal area trimmed and make sure to keep it clean of fecal matter (doesn't take long for flies to buzz and maggots to develop)
- F. Poodle cut the tail – i.e. cut the hair closer to the body (about halfway up the tail) short so if they urinate on it you can clean/dry it better. Also, cut off some of the length of the hair on the remaining tail for the same reason – moreso in females than males. In males, cut the hair about the penis short and trimmed to help keep it dry and lessen urine smell
- G. Bathing
  - Use a low stationed bed with flow through mesh to wash and rinse
  - If you can get the dog in the tub, get a suction mat that water flows through to help keep the dog from slipping
  - Make sure to bathe and rinse thoroughly – I use Fresh N Clean shampoo as it is gentle, and really helps alleviate the urine smell
  - BE SURE TO TOTALLY DRY THE DOG – no dampness whatsoever. If the dog is even slightly damp, and they are sedentary due to DM, a hot spot will develop in hours so complete drying is essential
  - Have help to bathe a DM dog – this is NOT a one person job and this will help avoid injury to you and to your dog.
  - I don't like to use the no rinse shampoos – they don't get rid of the smell and in fact, can make it worse. Even if I am only doing a partial bath, I dilute shampoo in a lot of water, then rinse thoroughly with a sponge and bucket, and dry thoroughly.
  - One friend of mine uses two wrought iron chairs pushed together and water flows easily through those. She makes sure to have lots of hands to keep the dog steady. A wrought iron lounge would also work well for this and be lower.
- H. Monitor the ears closely – make sure to trim the ears up underneath to help with airflow and check the ears daily to make sure there are no infections. Remember, your DM dog cannot scratch his ears as his hind legs don't work and further, they can't balance on one leg, so check ears frequently and give them good gentle ear rubs several times a day – they will sure show you their appreciation for it!
- I. If you opt to do some sort of aquatherapy (including treadmills under water) be sure the rehab place has a forced air dryer to totally dry your dog afterwards. If they don't, buy one and take it with you. If it is real time consuming to dry each time, then find a groomer and have the dog shaved down. We all love the long fur, but bottom line is keep them comfortable and dry and avoid hot spots/skin infections. Eventually, you will be shaving the areas that can become wet anyhow (between legs and where penis area is on belly) so do what is best for the dog physically.