

## Recognizing History and Symptoms of Disk Disease

by MaryAnne Teal

I recently lost a dear pet of nearly 14 years. While tragic and sad, it is made even more so because she spent most of her lifetime as a victim of Canine Intervertebral Disk Disease. I have often wondered, over the span of her 10-1/2 years as a cart dog, if I could have seen the onset of the disease (and maybe minimized its effects) if I had known what to look for in either her history or symptoms. And then, armed with that knowledge, could I have taken preventative steps?

I began scouring the information on disk disease that is available for lay persons, and I found a serious lack of information with regard to recognizing pain in your dog. There was also little guidance on what the historical indicators might be that would predispose or make a dog “at risk” for disk problems and/or paralysis. Not surprisingly, in turning to a book on alternative diet and therapies (*A Holistic Guide for a Healthy Dog* by Wendy Volhard and Kerry Brown DVM), I did find a section on canine chiropractic that offered some of the information that I was seeking.

### *Historical Indicators*

Volhard and Brown suggest that dogs with history including the following items should be looked at for chiropractic examination. I would suggest that many of these items would also indicate the potential for disk rupture in our breed--since the increasingly fragile nature of the disk would increase the possibility of injury by any of these activities. While I am not necessarily advocating canine chiropractic as a treatment for disk disease (as I am not by any means an expert) or suggesting that *every* dog engaging in some of these activities or behaviors will be a victim of intervertebral disk disease, I do think that observing any of these things in our dachshunds could at least lead us to observe/examine them more closely for signs of back pain.

- Hit by a car
- Lameness after play. Lameness may go away, but the dog is never “quite right” after
- A dog who is “body slammed” by another--particularly if they are rolled over
- Falls--from a porch, down the stairs, etc.
- A dog who lost their balance while running and hit some solid object (wall, tree, etc.)
- A dog working a canine sport which requires jumping (obedience, agility, frisbee)
- Decreasing performance by a show dog in any area--performance or conformation
- Any dog who has been anesthetized
- Dogs who cannot jump on furniture, or who is refusing to go up or down stairs
- Dogs with poor leash manners--who pull on the leash--the number one cause of cervical subluxation

In addition, Volhard and Brown note that exercise overindulgence, environmental conditions (slippery floors, ice, rough play with other dogs, etc.), emotional stresses (kenneling), and nutrition can play a potential role in adversely affecting spinal health.

It is important to note here that two of the major factors influencing disk rupture in our dachshunds are poor structure and dogs who are overweight. As a novice in dachshunds, a wise man once told me that his view of a dachshund was like a properly suspended bridge...that for the bridge to remain stable and supportive, it had to have the proper balance of ribbing and loin, and that dogs who had short ribbing were the most at risk for disk failure. It's a simple picture of correct structure which has served me well over the years. When I look back at my “cart dog,” I know now that she had very short ribbing, which may indeed have contributed to her eventual disk failure. My dog was not overweight, as many pet dachshunds

sometimes are, so this did not play a factor in her particular injury. However, at the time, I was not at all knowledgeable about feeding or canine nutrition, and was feeding a grocery store brand of food which was full of sugar, grain, artificial colors, and preservatives. None of these things certainly promoted either health or well-being in my dog, and I must wonder how much that lack of nutritious food played in the eventual deterioration of the disk material, especially since she was fed this “junk food” during her formative puppy years. Certainly food for thought, though beyond the scope of this article except for the fact that it does add to the “history” for my dog, as her health might not have been at its optimum level.

### ***Symptoms and Signs of Back Pain***

Finding a list of physical symptoms of pain proved a little easier. Please note that dachshunds are a frequently stoic breed, and some of the symptoms can be quite subtle. In fact, some dogs may never indicate that they are in pain at all, no matter how closely you observe them. Unfortunately, in the treatment of disk disease, since time is of the essence, as spinal damage is generally irreversible, this recognition of pain is critical.

According to the DCA booklet on disc disease, spinal cord damage can occur through compression, lack of oxygen or glucose delivery to the spinal cord, release of destructive chemicals from the blood or nervous tissue breakdown, or even by the animal’s immune response to the “foreign” disk material being released. The whole process results in a cascade effect which must be dealt with very quickly in order to minimize the damage to the spinal cord and other nervous system tissue. Because of this, it is very important to be able to have recognizable and easily observable signs that a dog might be in pain.

Here is a list of some observable traits that may be applicable to a dog who is experiencing back pain.

- Personality change: not as active or happy, aggression, appearance of anxiety, withdrawing from others or hiding
- Tail cock: a tail that does not wag symmetrically; or tail tucked between legs
- Stiff or hunched back (particularly a roach)
- Lumpy/bumpy feeling through the spine, especially near back of the rib cage
- Head tilt, or problem turning head in one direction
- Scuffs one foot while gaiting
- Stilted rear gait; Sidewinding
- Lack of symmetry limb to limb--catches or rattles through shoulder or hock
- Tail clamped to or under body; tail held straight out (not relaxed)
- Skin “crawls” or dog shakes when a particular point is touched
- Aesthetic appearance: Instead of seeing the “whole” dog, the eye is drawn to one particular part (back, pelvis, head, neck, etc.) If you have trouble determining if a dog is gaiting correctly or not the dog should probably be examined by a professional. Correct dogs have a “presence” and look correct.
- Shaking or shivering uncontrollably
- Eyes squinted or “glazed”

Other symptoms of spinal injury may be moderate or severe, depending upon the type and degree of disk rupture.

Symptoms generally related to cervical (neck) disk pain or rupture include:

- Crying, especially when being touched or manipulated, or when lowering head to eat or drink
- Poor appetite
- Muscle spasms; reluctance to move
- One or both front legs lame
- Ataxia to all four legs--rarely results in paralysis

Symptoms related to thoracolumbar vertebrae (back) can be different than those presented above and include:

- Crying in pain or shaking, which can happen spontaneously or when the dog is picked up
- Reluctant to move: either refusal to jump on furniture, climb stairs, or simply the desire to lay around more than usual
- Poor appetite
- Ataxia to rear legs: dog appears to walk as if his rear is going in a different direction than his front (caused by pressure on the nerve roots to the back end)
- Paraparesis or Paralysis of the rear legs (if nerve damage is severe enough)
- Tense Abdomen: called referred pain; mimics other diseases/disorders and can sometimes cause delay in proper diagnosis of back pain/disk rupture
- Hunched appearance, particularly a roached back
- Fecal or urinary incontinence; dogs with severe problems may not be able to urinate unless expressed

Though some of these symptoms are relatively subtle, an aware pet owner can recognize most of them through a daily hands on examination of their dog. Daily petting or massage can signal an owner to changes in their dog's well being, and possibly lead to earlier intervention in many disk disease cases. It is well worth the effort. Dogs experiencing even the subtlest signs of pain should be crate rested immediately and veterinary advice sought.

Resist the impulse to give analgesics or anti-inflammatories without veterinary advice, since doing so could mask the pain--our only real indicator that there is something wrong with our dog. If we are aware and proactive in recognizing and dealing with our dog's pain responses, some cases of spinal injury can be caught early and further damage can be prevented.

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[http://web.archive.org/web/20020806081308/http://caninetimes.com/Articles/Iams/iams\\_pfizer\\_animal\\_healthRimadyl.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20020806081308/http://caninetimes.com/Articles/Iams/iams_pfizer_animal_healthRimadyl.htm)

It is recognised that the disc can withstand extensive compressive force without herniation (11), however. Schmorl's nodes may result from such force (10). If nuclear material leaks from a diseased disc and contacts nerve roots and other perineural tissue a "chemical radiculitis" may result (16)(17). presentation, duration and severity of symptoms and the amount of anatomic change. The clinical presentation of disc disease can be summarised in the following way: 1. Acute low back pain. Natural History of Lumbar Disc Disease. From: Lumbar Disc Disease, in Spine - State of the Art. Reviews. Publisher: Hanley and Belfus Inc. 1989. All rights reserved. Recognizing History and Symptoms of Disk Disease by MaryAnne Teall recently lost a dear pet of nearly 14 years. While tragic and sad, it is made even more so because she spent most of her lifetime as a victim of Canine Intervertebral Disk Disease. I have often wondered, over the span of her 10-1/2 years as a cart dog, if I could have seen the onset of the disease (and maybe minimized its effects) if I had known what to look for in either her history or symptoms. And then, armed with that knowledge, could I have taken preventative steps? I began scouring the information on disk disease. Learn more about what canine intervertebral disc disease is, how to recognize symptoms, and which treatment options are best for keeping your pup pain-free. It can also be caused by trauma, like in the case of a fall or an accident. Recognizing symptoms of canine intervertebral disc disease. If you're worried your dog may be suffering from IVDD, there are a few telltale signs to look for, like a hunched back with a lowered head. The "drunken sailor" walk is another key indicator of IVDD. This walk will appear as your dog limping, hopping, favoring hind legs, and walking in a crooked line. Other symptoms to look for include: Yelping. Shivering. What is Degenerative Disc Disease? Aging causes disks to lose their water content which causes shrinkage, reduced sponginess, and loss of height. This means the vertebrae are closer together and can hinder certain movements or cause pain with different activities. What are the Symptoms? Dysfunction Stage Tears and separation of the disc endplates, cartilage destruction, and a synovial inflammatory reaction can cause low back pain, neck pain, pain with motion. Besides a history and physical exam that focuses on muscle strength, sensory loss, range of motion, and reflexes, MRI can diagnose both contained and non-contained disk herniations described as migrated disks, extruded disks, or protruded disks.