

Understanding helps handle epilepsy in your family pet

By Dr. Robert O. Shannon

"It was a frightening experience and, frankly, I was really scared. My 2-year-old dog had been lying quietly on his favorite pillow when suddenly he jumped to his feet, fell on his side, didn't move for a few seconds, then started thrashing and jerking all four legs and occasionally acted as if he was stretching, becoming very rigid. He also was salivating profusely and lost control of his bowels and bladder. My first inclination was to help him in some way. As I approached him, the saliva and anxious expression frightened me even more. I quickly backed away for fear of being bitten. The first thought to enter my mind was rabies.

"However, everything I could recollect about rabies was that it didn't appear suddenly - it was more subtle. My next thought was that he had been poisoned in some manner, but by what? He is primarily an indoor dog and is a finicky eater. I rushed to the telephone and called my veterinarian. During our conversation, I noticed my pet now appeared to be perfectly normal and was walking around the room looking for another soft spot to stretch out and nap. Although he did appear somewhat curious about the feces, urine, saliva, etc. in the area; it was almost as if another dog had made the mess. I made an appointment to take him to the veterinary hospital immediately for a complete examination."

This scenario has been heard often by veterinary practitioners.

Seizures or convulsions in a pet can be caused by a variety of conditions, including poisoning, low blood sugar, low blood calcium or a brain tumor; but the most common cause in dogs is epilepsy, a disease similar to the epilepsy that occurs in humans. According to Dr. Alan Parker, a veterinarian at the University of Illinois Teaching Hospital and a specialist in neurology, epilepsy in dogs may have a variety of causes, including heredity, a blow on the head, a shortage of oxygen at birth, or an infection of the brain such as encephalitis. Parker emphasizes that there are several significant points to remember concerning epilepsy:

1) The first seizures from hereditary epilepsy usually appear between 1 and 5 years of age. In pets younger than one year, seizures tend to be the result of poisoning or brain infection. After 6 years

of age, brain tumors or other physical conditions are likely causes of seizures.

2) Although most seizures are self-limiting, there are drugs which can reduce their incidence, but they work only in about two-thirds of the cases. Epileptic seizures can't be forecast. Some dogs have seizures regularly, others only have them at irregular intervals. The wide range between individuals makes treatment difficult to pinpoint. Pets should receive drug treatment if they have seizures every two months, have more than one seizure at a time, or have a seizure that lasts a long time (15 minutes or more). Drugs for controlling seizures should only be administered as recommended by a veterinarian.

3) Epileptic dogs should never be bred unless the owner and the veterinarian are absolutely certain that a pet's seizure was a one-time event caused by poisoning or something equally as obvious.

4) Stressful situations, itchy skin or ears, and the onset of heat in an intact female can tend to increase the incidence of seizures in an epileptic pet. Sexual urges are also stressful in males, therefore neutering can decrease the incidence of seizures in both males and females in addition to preventing the animal from passing on the problem.

5) Owners should not put their fingers in a pet's mouth during a seizure. Unlike humans, animals are unlikely to choke on their tongue but they can clamp down on a finger. Children should not be permitted to handle an animal during a seizure.

6) After a seizure, the pet may act scared. Stroking the animal may help calm it down. Sometimes the pet may need to be restrained to keep it from possibly injuring itself.

7) Dogs are more likely to have epilepsy than cats. Not only are dogs more likely to inherit the condition, they also are prone to the canine distemper virus which may be a contributing factor in causing seizures.

Epilepsy should be considered an affliction rather than a life threatening illness. Because epilepsy is often treatable, epileptic dogs may lead a happy, long life.

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