Fact sheet

Joint problems in young dogs

Puppies continue to grow and develop for months or years after birth. Giant breeds may not reach full adult size for 18 months or 2 years. During this growth period they are at particular risk from bone and joint disorders. Some of these are inherited such as hip and elbow dysplasia. Damage can also result from traumatic injury.

What is an inherited joint disease?

Inherited diseases are genetic conditions passed from parents to their offspring. Sometimes the puppy inherits the tendency to develop a disease and the severity may be influenced by factors in its upbringing such as feeding and exercise. Inherited diseases are much more common in pedigree dogs than in cross breeds and some conditions are more common in some breeds than others.

What are the inherited joint conditions?

Various other conditions affect individual dogs of pure or cross breed. In general, inherited or partly inherited problems can only be prevented by careful breeding programmes that prevent affected animals from producing puppies. Such schemes have been adopted by a number of specific breed societies. Before being allowed to breed, dogs are examined to assess the health of their joints. Individuals who are badly affected should not be allowed to breed. The three most important inherited conditions are hip dysplasia, elbow dysplasia and luxating patella.

What is hip dysplasia?

Hip dysplasia is a common disorder typically affecting the hip joint of medium and large breed dogs. Hip dysplasia occurs when the ball-and-socket joint of the hip does not 'fit together' properly. This results in rubbing, which damages the surfaces of the joint, leading to pain and eventually arthritis.

Hip dysplasia is partly inherited but other factors can affect the severity of the condition including diet, growth rate and the level of exercise given to young growing dogs of larger breeds. Most pedigree dogs (of breeds where hip dysplasia is likely) will have their hips checked by x-ray and a 'hip score' assigned to them. Those dogs with low scores are most desirable, as their offspring are less likely to suffer from the effects of hip dysplasia.

Animals with hip dysplasia will go on to develop arthritis in the hip joints later in life. Arthritis causes pain and stiffness but can be managed in most animals to provide a reasonable quality of life. Weight control is important and affected animals may need a restricted exercise programme and pain relief. In animals where the condition is very severe surgery may be the only option.

What is elbow dysplasia?

Elbow dysplasia is a similar condition to hip dysplasia. In this condition the elbow joint is abnormal causing lameness and pain. In the UK the Kennel Club runs a scheme which allows for screening of young dogs to detect the presence of this condition. Surgery may be recommended to remove bony fragments and limit the development of arthritis in later life. You should contact your vet for more information on this condition if you are worried about your pet.

What is a luxating patella?

Luxating patella affects the stifle (knee) joint. In the normal knee the patella (kneecap) slides up and down along a special groove in front of the leg. In this condition the groove is too shallow and the patella slips in and out, causing lameness and discomfort. Dogs with luxating patella typically hop on one hind leg for a few strides before putting the leg to the ground again and running normally on it.

In many moderately and severely affected dogs, surgery can improve signs and stabilise the loose patella. In most cases the outlook is better when this surgery is performed in young dogs.

The early months of a puppy's life are important for its later development. A healthy diet and regular exercise are essential to development. If you are getting a puppy for the first time discuss your concerns with your vet and they will be able to give you advice on all aspects of your puppy's care.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your dog please contact Dalehead Veterinary Group on (01729) 823538 and we will be happy to advise you.