



Diabetes is a relatively common disease in older people and is being recognised more frequently in older pets. If untreated the disease has serious effects and will ultimately result in the death of your pet. The good news is that the majority of diabetic animals can now be treated and may live normal, happy lives if you are prepared to invest time and money in their care.

What is diabetes?

Diabetes is a disease caused by a lack of insulin. Insulin is a hormone which keeps blood sugar (glucose) at just the right level. When there is a lack of insulin, sugar from food builds up in the blood and eventually starts to appear in the urine.

What are the signs of diabetes

Animals with diabetes have high blood sugar levels and lose sugar in their urine. They are more thirsty than normal and often lose weight despite having a good appetite. If the condition is untreated, eye and kidney diseases or other illness may develop. If the early signs of diabetes are missed, more serious signs such as vomiting and depression may develop. If diabetes is left untreated for weeks or months your pet could go into a coma and die.

Why does my dog have diabetes?

If your dog has been diagnosed as a diabetic you may be wondering if you have done something wrong. Unfortunately some dogs are just more likely to develop the disease than others. Middle-aged female dogs are most likely to get diabetes but any dog can be affected. Obese dogs are slightly more likely to develop the disease, but there are many obese dogs who do not develop diabetes. In females, the disease often starts within a month or two of a season or 'heat' due to the effects of hormonal changes. It is advisable to have all female dogs neutered if they are not going to have puppies, and most certainly if your dog already has diabetes, as the disease will be more easily controlled.

Can diabetes be treated?

Diabetic dogs require regular insulin injections to control their blood sugar levels. Diabetes will not go away and so these injections must be given on a regular basis (usually once or twice daily), for the rest of your dog's life. Your dog's diet will also have to be carefully controlled. Only the food prescribed by your vet should be given and all tibbits must be excluded from the diet. Successful management of diabetes requires that feeding times, exercise and injections are all carefully coordinated.

Why do diabetic dogs need injections?

Some humans have a type of diabetes that can be controlled by a change in diet. Dogs do not get this type of diabetes and always require insulin injections. Insulin is a protein and (as with any other protein), can be digested. If insulin were given as a tablet, the tablets would be digested by the acid in the stomach and the insulin would have no effect. Special 'pens' (which inject insulin through the skin without the use of a needle) have been developed for use in diabetic people. However, dogs have a much thicker skin than humans and these pens are not likely to be readily available for animal use in the near future. The normal injections are given under the skin and do not hurt. A good tip is to feed your dog after administering the injection. Dogs quickly learn that once they have had their injection they get their food and so are happy to stand still for the jab.

What if I can't give my dog injections?

Unfortunately it is essential that diabetic dogs receive regular insulin injections if they are to live a full and healthy life. Most people are naturally concerned that they will be unable to give injections to their pet. Your vet will teach you how to do this and within a few weeks most owners of diabetic pets are happy to give the injections at home. Until you are confident your vet will probably see you every day at the veterinary surgery and help you give the injections.

What are the urine samples for?

When sugar levels in the blood get very high the sugar starts to spill out into the urine. Urine samples from

Diabetes mellitus



your dog will need to be tested regularly for the presence of sugar. The results from these samples will help your vet to monitor your dog's progress and ensure that the treatment is correct. It may take many weeks (or even months) to find the correct combination of diet and insulin dose for your dog.

Why are so many check-ups needed?

Your dog should be regularly monitored to make sure it doesn't gain or lose weight. Your vet needs to examine your dog regularly and review their notes to see how your dog is progressing. At other intervals your vet may want to take blood samples from your dog. If you have any concerns about any aspect of your dog's treatment discuss them with your vet.

Do diabetic dogs always feel unwell?

There are two important complications to be aware of:

- **Low blood sugar** (hypoglycaemia) - If this is untreated it may result in permanent brain damage. Symptoms develop rapidly with restlessness, confusion, tremors, twitches, convulsions or coma being the main signs. Sugar should be given by mouth, dissolved in water or as lumps. If your pet is still awake it may be offered food and should eat voluntarily. Contact your vet immediately if these signs develop.
- **High blood sugar** (hyperglycaemia) - This usually develops more gradually and your pet may become unwell over a number of days. As the disease progresses your pet may go into a coma, although will not respond to sugar solutions. Contact your vet immediately if your pet is unwell and they will probably want to take him into the hospital.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your dog please contact Hampden Veterinary Hospital on 01296 423666 and we will be happy to advise you.