

## **Dr. Cindy's Pet Health Corner: Lyme Disease in Dogs**

By Cynthia D. Burnett, DVM

“Annabelle”, a medium-sized Yellow Labrador Retriever mix, came into the hospital with several troubling symptoms. She was losing weight even though her owner kept her food bowl full and constantly available, and her hind legs were stiff and painful. Her owner was puzzled because the dog stayed in a fenced yard and was rarely in contact with other dogs. It did not seem likely that Annabelle could have caught something from another dog, or been injured on the road.

Annabelle's owner thought that perhaps she had a severe case of intestinal worms, which might have explained the weight loss, but not the dog's stiffness and pain. A fecal test revealed that she did not have intestinal worms. Instead, a blood test showed she had been exposed to Lyme disease, which in our region is carried by deer ticks.

Not every dog that is exposed to Lyme will develop an active case of the disease, but all will develop the antibody, which can make diagnosis challenging. However, many of the dogs that are exposed to Lyme disease develop an active case in three to five months. The most common symptoms are sudden onset of lameness, fever, decrease in appetite and joint swelling. More rarely Lyme disease can affect a dog's heart, kidneys, or brain, with or without obvious symptoms.

Fortunately for Annabelle, she had a more typical case that I was able to diagnose quickly. Treatment of Lyme disease in dogs requires a long course of antibiotics, with doxycycline being the preferred drug. I prescribed three weeks of doxycycline for Annabelle, with the owner giving her a pill each morning and evening. We also decided to supplement her regular dry food with a can of prescription food each day to help her regain the weight she had lost.

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Dogs typically respond rapidly to the treatment for Lyme disease, with a noticeable improvement usually visible in three to five days. Annabelle was moving more easily and her appetite increased after five days of treatment. By the end of the course of antibiotics she was well on the road to recovery. The two most important things her owner can do to protect Annabelle in the future are to vaccinate her dog for Lyme, and practice good tick prevention measures.

The vaccination against Lyme disease can be given to any dog that is nine weeks of age or older. It is a good idea to vaccinate your puppy against Lyme as the disease is more likely to cause kidney failure in young dogs than older dogs. The initial vaccine is a series of two shots, with the second shot given two to three weeks after the first one. Thereafter dogs should be vaccinated annually. If a dog has gone more than 18 months without a Lyme booster it has to undergo the initial series again.

Lyme disease cannot be passed directly from a dog to a person, but your dog could bring infected ticks into your yard or house. Therefore dog owners should safeguard the health of their families and their pets by being vigilant about tick control. Keep the grass in your yard cut, and do not allow pets to roam in the woods. Use a veterinarian-recommended product, such as K9 Advantix, that kills and repels ticks. Remember that in our warm climate ticks can be a threat in any season, and that the common deer tick carries a number of diseases that are dangerous to people and pets alike.