

Lyme Disease in Dogs

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Your dog was just diagnosed with Lyme Disease and you probably have a lot of questions. The good news is that with proper treatment, your dog will probably be just fine. The bad news is, there are still more questions than answers when it comes to Lyme. Hopefully this handout helps you understand what we do and don't know about this complicated disease.

How Did My Dog Get Lyme?!

If your dog tests positive for Lyme, this means your dog has been bitten by a Lyme-infected tick and has been exposed to the bacteria that leads to Lyme disease (*Borrelia burgdorferi* for you science lovers out there). Your dog mounted an appropriate antibody response to this invader. It doesn't necessarily mean that your dog will ever become sick from Lyme disease.

Testing positive for Lyme is a wake up call that at some point in the dog's past, there was a break in tick preventive. There are many brands that used to be effective, but over time fleas and ticks have built a resistance to it. There are many counterfeit products out there, especially if they were purchased on-line. In addition, many people start flea and tick preventive too late in the season and stop too early. A little known fact is that ticks hunt for their victims BETTER in cold weather than warm weather. They hunt by infra-red vision and our body heat stands out much better against a cold background. Our best advice is to use a good name-brand vet-prescribed flea and tick preventive year-round.

What Does This Mean For My Dog? For Me? For My Other Pets?

If your dog tested positive for Lyme as part of their annual screening test, this means that your dog has been bitten by a Lyme-infected tick and that their body mounted an appropriate immune response. It does NOT mean that your dog will necessarily get sick. Your dog's immune system is likely to keep the little buggers in check.

Lyme disease is not contagious from dogs to other dogs or people. BUT, the tick that bit your dog could have bitten you or your other pets. Being bitten by an infected tick is the only way to get Lyme disease. Cats do not seem to be affected by clinical symptoms related to Lyme disease (but ticks can give them other diseases, so it's just as important that they be on a good preventive).

What Does Infection Look Like?

If your dog's immune system has not controlled the Lyme bacteria and your pet is experiencing a "Lyme flare up," they will typically have a fever. They will likely either not want to move, or will be limping. The Lyme bacteria likes to hide out in hard-to-reach areas of the body, and a classic area is joints. This is why limping is a classic symptom. Sometimes, the dog will limp on one leg one day and another leg the next day. This is called "shifting leg lameness" and is a typical sign of Lyme. Lyme flare ups can look like anything from a mild limp to not even being able to stand up.

Is It Just Joint Pain?

For the most part, yes. Unlike in people, who can have serious long-term health consequences from Lyme infection, dogs typically either remain asymptomatic or have joint pain.

There is a very rare complication called Lyme nephritis. This is caused by the body “over-reacting” to the bacteria and making large quantities of antibodies that “clog” up the kidneys. The kidneys are the body’s filtering mechanism and these antibodies clog the filter, leading to irreversible kidney failure.

Certain breeds of dogs are more pre-disposed to Lyme nephritis than others. Because of this, we may recommend a urine test and treatment for Lyme even if your dog seems otherwise fine.

What is the Treatment?

As mentioned above, the Lyme bacteria likes to hide in hard-to-reach areas of the body. Because of this, even with proper treatment, it is difficult and relatively rare to eradicate it all from the body. This is why most asymptomatic dogs are not treated. And this is why prevention is so important.

Treatment typically consists of 30 days of an antibiotic called doxycycline. (Yes, that’s right, 1 month; we told you it was hard to treat!). Dogs who are having a flare causing limping typically start feeling much better within a few days of starting treatment.

It is possible for dogs to have more than one flare up in their lifetimes. However, it is more common for dogs to test positive and never have any clinical problems at all.

Vaccination

Vaccination is a good way to help prevent Lyme disease. There is some evidence that even if your dog tests positive, vaccination can help prevent further and worse infection (called “super infection”). No vaccine is 100%, and Lyme is no exception. Ticks can also carry other serious diseases. Because of this, effective tick preventive is by far more effective than vaccination. We will discuss your dog’s lifestyle and vaccines at every annual visit and make recommendations that are customized to your dog’s situation.

Tick Prevention

As alluded to earlier, effective and properly administered flea and tick preventive is the best way to prevent Lyme disease as well as other diseases spread by these guys. Please ask us to make specific recommendations. Be careful when purchasing anything on-line, as there are many convincing-appearing counterfeits out there. And remember to keep administering your preventive year-round. Preventive is very important even if your dog has Lyme disease. Preventive works to keep your dog from becoming “super infected” and also helps protect from other diseases. Many of the preventives we recommend also protect against heartworm disease and intestinal parasites.

The Bottom Line

Keep your dog on a good, veterinary-recommended, year-round flea and tick preventive, regardless of Lyme status. If your dog tests positive for Lyme disease, monitor them for symptoms and follow our advice. Since treatment will not likely result in clearance of the pesky creatures, treatment is only recommended if your dog is symptomatic or at high risk for kidney failure. And take a big breath, chances are it’ll be just fine!