



Park Veterinary Centre

256 Cassiobury Drive. Watford. Herts. WD17 3PA

01923 223321

Vestibular Disease in Dogs

The vestibular (inner ear) organs provide the brain with important information about body position. It tells the body if it is upside down, right-side up, tumbling, turning, falling or accelerating. It helps to maintain balance.

When your dog has vestibular disease, it is most often associated with the inner ear (peripheral) rather than the brain (central).

Signs of vestibular disease in pets can include:

- Circling (spinning or walking in circles)
- Standing with an exaggerated wide stance
- Head tilting
- Falling or rolling to one side
- Nystagmus (involuntary drifting eye movements)
- Squint or strabismus (abnormal position of the eyeballs)
- Ataxia (stumbling, staggering, lack of coordination or general wobbliness)
- Vomiting and motion sickness

These signs can come on very suddenly and can be very frightening. Most people think that their pet has suffered a stroke. Strokes are very uncommon in pets and most pets with vestibular disease will recover over a few weeks.

Causes:

Peripheral vestibular disease in dogs is usually of unknown origin (idiopathic), less common causes can be middle ear infection, head trauma or a brain lesion.

How can I help my pet with idiopathic vestibular disease?

Your vet may prescribe some medication to reduce nausea and motion sickness in the short term and will often use a “wait and see” approach to treatment. You can help your pet in several ways:

- Give your pet time. Canine idiopathic vestibular disease is generally not life threatening, most pets will naturally adapt and compensate within about 3 to 5 days, although a head tilt may remain.
- Comfort your pet by managing your own stress. Pets are sensitive to the mood of their companions. The less agitated you are, the calmer he /she will be.
- Provide a quiet resting spot. This should be away from all the hustle and bustle of a busy household, minimise your pet’s exposure to enthusiastic toddlers or loud television for example. Avoid your pet settling in a middle of a hallway where people walk through, even if you are attentive to cautiously stepping around your dog, his heightened motion sensitivity may make him startle easily.

- Provide lighting and support. Good lighting is essential for your dog to see his visual clues to help his positioning. Also consider providing a blanket rolled up in a C-shape to support and surround your pet when he/she is lying down.
- Avoid carrying your pet. In the same way that a human with a vestibular disease needs to move about to help recalibrate sensory information, your pet needs to retrain his system by navigating on his own. The touch sensors in a pet's paw give information about balance to the inner ear. This won't be activated if your dog's paws are dangling in the air. Instead, help your dog walk by placing your hands on both sides of his body or use a towel/sling under his belly.
- If your pet is not improving it is possible that there may be an underlying cause for the vestibular disease (rather than being idiopathic- no known cause). Further investigation may be necessary, including advanced imaging (MRI/CT scan) to determine the underlying cause.

