

Fit for nothing?

It was late one evening when the phone rang. I was told that 'Bobby', a 4 year old crossbreed dog, had started convulsing 30 minutes before, and showed no signs of stopping. This is a real emergency as without urgent medication the dog is quite likely to die. Injections have to be given into the dogs' blood stream to stop the fit, and prevent further ones, before tablets to suppress further fits from occurring are started.

Bobby was suffering from epilepsy, a condition of the brain that causes the dog to have fits. I was told by Bobby's owner that he had fits previously but as they were fairly infrequent, and did not last that long, they had not had Bobby treated. Unfortunately, in some cases, dogs that have epileptic fits, that remain untreated, go on to have 'status epilepticus', which is a continuous fit they do not recover from.

Epilepsy is a disorder in which seizures ('fits') occur repeatedly. Sometimes the seizure begins as a result of damage to the brain, but usually there is no apparent reason for the seizures and the animal is otherwise completely healthy.

If your dog has a fit the outlook may at first seem bleak, but it is important to remember that in typical epileptic seizures the dog is unconscious and not aware that he/she is having a seizure. Also, in most instances effective treatment is possible, and many epileptic dogs enjoy a pain-free, long and happy life.

Epilepsy is usually first seen in young animals, typically between 6 months to 5 years of age but can affect animals of any age. Each seizure usually lasts 1 to 2 minutes but may be longer in some individuals.

In a typical seizure, the dog will lie on its side and alternate between rigidly straightening out its head and neck and performing jerking, paddling movements with its legs. There may be partial or complete loss of consciousness as well as a loss of control of motions and urine.

In addition to the seizure itself, you may notice strange behaviour both before and after the seizure. For example, your dog may appear restless or behave oddly before the seizure and may be sleepy or restless afterwards. Some dogs become very affectionate while others seem abnormally hungry or thirsty.



Each epileptic dog will have its own individual signs.

No one really knows why true epilepsy occurs. Your veterinary surgeon may first wish to rule out other causes of the seizures, as seizures can occur for reasons other than epilepsy.

Inheritance has been shown to play an important role in true canine epilepsy for certain breeds. Breeds that seem particularly susceptible to

epilepsy include the German Shepherd, Poodle, Irish Setter, Labrador, Golden Retriever, Welsh Springer Spaniel and American Cocker Spaniel.

In some breeds, particularly the Labrador and Golden Retriever, the incidence of epilepsy is higher in the male dogs than the female.

In Bobby's case he was lucky. The medication he was given stopped his fits and, after several days in the hospital, he was discharged with tablets. He will take these for the rest of his life to reduce the chance of further fits occurring.

So if your dog has, or is having, fits, do consult your Veterinary Surgeon as soon as possible. Regular fits, or clusters of fits, always need treatment. Without it, your dog may not be as lucky as Bobby!

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