

Wobbler's Dog Therapeutic Protocol

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'Wobbler's Disease' is the name given to a condition affecting the base of the neck in large or giant breed dogs (and some other animals as well). Over the years, these big dogs can develop a thickening of the ligaments that stabilize the vertebra in this region. With age the discs begin to degenerate and the space between the vertebrae narrow. When this occurs, the thickened ligaments buckle and press on the spinal cord. Alternately, the discs can slowly herniate and also press on the spinal cord. The first sign is usually low head carriage, yelping with certain head movements or a reluctance to turn in specific directions. Pressure on the spinal cord may also cause a 'power outage' that can affect coordination and power in the rear legs. As the condition progresses the animal may lose the ability to control the limbs altogether. Traditionally, owners can be offered therapies such as medication or surgery to address the problem. An interesting study in 2006 showed that Wobbler's dogs treated with surgery as compared to medication alone survived for an equal length of time. This is good news for those concerned about surgical complications in their older companion.

The even better news is that there is more that can be done for these old guys! Physical rehabilitation therapy can assist in treating these dogs. The treatments prescribed center around traction & gentle mobilizations to enhance blood flow in and around disc protrusion. In humans, it has been found that exposure of herniated disc material in the neck to an increase in blood flow contributes to its resorption and/or regression. Utilizing human and animal research, mobilizations have been shown to aid in pain relief for spinal or joint conditions. The effects of mobilizations are reportedly a reduction in acute pain and inhibition of reflex muscle spasms. Both traction and mobilizations can be useful treatment tools to bolster function and comfort for these dogs.



1. Traction:
Slowly push the skull away, allowing the animal to relax. Take up the slack with your pushing and then hold that amount of traction. Hold for 10—15 seconds or longer you can both tolerate it. You may be pushing too hard or too fast if your dog gets wiggly or tries to extend its neck to 'push' you off. Start again slower and try to get your pet to relax. Repeat 5—10 times, several times a day—up to one session per hour.

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Therapeutic modalities can also be useful in treating Wobbler's. A research review paper in 2009 showed that laser therapy could aid in pain relief, and that the effects of laser were immediate and could last up to 3 months after treatment ended! Other studies showed that laser could even aid in spinal cord and nerve regeneration. In addition to laser, pulsed electromagnetic field and microcurrent are also treatments that may aid in pain relieve and hasten the recovery of function after a slow compression of the spinal cord injury (as in Wobblers).

Acupuncture may act as an adjunction therapy to the traction, mobilizations, and laser. A presentation was made in 2010 at a veterinary conference that looked at the use of acupuncture on dogs with neurologic neck disorders. Findings revealed that acupuncture was able to improve neurologic signs in 50% of the dogs treated for Wobblers. While this rate of improvement may not be sufficient as a stand-alone treatment, it may be beneficial when used in conjunction with the other therapies mentioned.

HOME TREATMENTS

1. Traction
2. Traction
3. Traction
4. Medications as prescribed by your veterinarian
5. Leash walks with a harness to avoid extra stress at the neck. Any number of short walks that do not seem to worsen the neck pain or 'wobbliness' are allowed.

CLINIC THERAPIES

1. Mobilizations
2. Traction
3. Modalities (Laser, Pulsed Electromagnetic Field, or Microcurrent, as available)
4. Acupuncture (as available)

Therapy is most successful when performed once or twice a week during a 'flare-up'. Traction should be continued at home on a periodically even when there is not a 'flare up'.

