Hypothyroidism in Dogs

Hypothyroidism is one of the most common hormonal diseases in dogs. It is almost unheard of in cats. Thyroid glands are located in the neck, and produce hormones that affect a dog's metabolism and help regulate many bodily functions. Hypothyroidism occurs when the thyroid gland stops producing hormones or doesn't produce enough hormones. When this happens, symptoms become noticeable.

The most common signs of hypothyroidism in dogs are a thinning of the fur, dull coat, weight gain, reduced activity and inability to tolerate cold. The hair thinning usually occurs on the trunk of the body, or at the base of the tail (also known as "rat tail"), and is usually not itchy. Weight gain can be considerable, and can happen even when food amounts are greatly reduced. In severe cases of hypothyroidism, there may be muscle weakness and drooping facial features.

Hypothyroid dogs are diagnosed not only with the above clinical signs, but with blood tests. Our wellness blood work panels routinely screen for hypothyroidism. In many instances, an additional blood test (Free T4) is needed to help confirm the diagnosis.

Once a dog is diagnosed with hypothyroidism, he/she should be started on a thyroid hormone replacement. Most dogs will need twice daily medication for the rest of their life. The thyroid pill does not cure the disease, but replaces the hormone that is no longer being produced. With treatment, the activity level can improve in 2 to 4 weeks, but the coat changes often take 6 to 8 months.

Once thyroid replacement therapy has started, we will test the blood again to determine if the dog's thyroid level is in the proper range. NOTE: In order to get an accurate reading, it is necessary to draw the blood for these tests between 4 to 6 hours after the thyroid pill is given. Adjustments to the dosage may be necessary and more testing may be needed to get the levels in the appropriate range. Once we know the dosing is adequate, yearly blood tests are performed in order to maintain the thyroid health.