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### Lumbosacral disease

Lumbosacral disease is a narrowing of the vertebral canal (the bony tunnel that the spinal cord and nerves travels through) at the junction of the lower spine and the pelvis (just above the hindlegs).

#### What causes the narrowing?

The narrowing can be caused by:

- Age-related bulging of the cartilage disc between the last lumbar vertebra and the pelvis (more common in older, large breed dogs)
- Age-related thickening of the tough fibrous tissues around the vertebrae at this position (more common in older, large breed dogs)
- Infection in the cartilage disc between the last lumbar vertebra and the pelvis (more common in young to middle aged dogs)
- Dislocation or fracture of the vertebrae (more common after trauma)

#### What are the signs of lumbosacral disease?

At the lumbosacral part of the back, there is no spinal cord but there are a lot of major nerves to the legs, tail, bladder and anus. Lumbosacral disease leads to pressure on these nerves.

The signs that we see with lumbosacral disease may include:

- Pain in the lower back region (may be restless and uncomfortable at home, reluctant to walk or jump / climb stairs)
- Pain when the lumbosacral region is manipulated by the vet (often done by tilting the pelvis outwards and backwards)
- Reduced flexion (bending) of the hock when walking
- Knuckling over of the hind paws
- Weakness of the tail
- Incontinence

As the disease progresses, more of these signs are seen.

Dogs with lumbosacral disease because of discospondylitis (infection in the disc) will often have a poor appetite and high temperature as well.



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### How is lumbosacral disease diagnosed?

The veterinary surgeon may suspect lumbosacral disease based on the signs above.

If discospondylitis (infection in the disc) or a vertebral fracture is considered a possibility, an Xray should be taken as many cases of discospondylitis can be detected on an Xray.

If the Xray is normal, an MRI scan would be required to definitely rule out discospondylitis and confirm age-related bulging of the disc and fibrous tissues. An MRI scan requires referral to a specialist centre and is performed under anaesthetic for approximately £1755. In some cases, if the vet suspects age-related bulging, our clients prefer to go along with this provisional diagnosis without having the MRI scan to confirm it.

### How is lumbosacral disease treated?

If the lumbosacral disease is caused by a fracture, then surgery to stabilise the fracture with screws and bone cement is recommended (this is a specialist procedure, performed by a surgical neurologist).

If the lumbosacral disease is caused by an infection of the disc, a long course of antibiotics is prescribed (between 6 weeks and 6 months) with regular repeat x-rays to monitor progress. A urine sample is sent away for culture, as the bacteria are often infecting the bladder as well as the disc.

If age-related degenerative disease is diagnosed (or assumed), it can be treated either medically or surgically:

1. Medical management involves using anti-inflammatory medications, a medication known as gabapentin to reduce nerve irritation, and strict rest. If this does not give adequate relief, an injection of steroid can be made into the back (many vets recommend giving a course of three injections at 0, 2 and 6 weeks). The dog must be under a very short anaesthetic for each injection.

2. If the above management fails to improve the dog's signs within 6-8 weeks, then surgery can be performed. The surgery must be carried out by a specialist neurosurgeon and involves scraping away the parts of the disc and the fibrous tissues that are pressing on the nerves. This is a fairly big surgery with some possible complications and a recovery time of several weeks.

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