

Spondylolithesis (Wobblers Syndrome)

by Jill Swedlow

Description

Wobblers Syndrome or Spondylolithesis is a disease of the nervous system caused by pressure on the spinal cord by the lower cervical (neck) vertebrae due to either a malformation of the vertebra or a malocclusion (when the vertebrae do not come together properly). This causes anywhere from a mild, to a severe affect in the dogs gait.

Cause

The cause of Wobblers Syndrome is unknown, although a link to fast growth and genetics is suspected. According to the Merck Veterinary Manual, "The cause is unknown, although rapid growth rates and nutrition, mechanical factors, and genetics may be implicated." Some breeders say that there's been a marked decrease in the incidence of not only Wobblers Syndrome, but other diseases that occur during the early, fast growth stages of *Great Danes*, when weight is kept down and growth rate has been slowed nutritionally.

Symptoms

Symptoms usually appear first in the rear legs as a mild uncoordination in gait (ataxia) and can escalate to involvement of the forelegs as well. The severely affected dog moves like a drunk and the uncoordination shows up most when the dog is walked and then moved sharply into a turn. An unsuspecting owner might simply conclude that his older puppy was just clumsy. Overly clumsy young Great Danes should be Wobbler suspects.

In Great Danes, Wobblers Syndrome most commonly appears from 10 months to a year and a half of age although it can manifest as old as 4 or 5 years, and as young as 5 weeks. In Doberman Pinschers it usually doesn't appear until the dog is 4 or 5 years old.

Diagnosis

A veterinarian will do a neurological work up on the dog and this often includes not only cervical spine x-rays, but a myelogram x-ray. A myelogram is not only dangerous to the dog, but is expensive. The owner should thoroughly investigate the advisability of this procedure, especially since if it is Wobblers Syndrome, surgery may not be the best option.

Treatment

Treatment of Wobblers Syndrome can include the use of corticosteroids, a neck brace and surgery. The surgery fuses the 2 unstable vertebrae which relieves the pressure on the spinal cord. Unfortunately this also puts further stress on adjoining vertebrae which can cause instability to recur in

them. Many Wobblers can live a long and pain free life with little or no treatment. Others deteriorate quickly and euthanasia then becomes the only kind choice.

WOBLERS SYNDROME

(A personal experience) by Jill Swedlow

Wobblers syndrome is caused by a narrowing or malformation of the spinal cervical (neck) vertebrae which causes pressure on the spinal cord itself. Other conditions can mimic the symptoms. The only definitive diagnosis of Wobblers Syndrome or Spondylolithesis, is a myelogram where dye is injected into the spinal column and then the neck is flexed and x-rayed.

I've had 3 wobblers. After my first, I've never bothered to do the myelogram again, as it's very dangerous, to say nothing of the expense! Once you've seen a wobbler, you'll never forget it. However, pain is seldom a problem. In the mildest cases you'll see a mild ataxia (lack of coordination) in the hind legs which is most noticeable on abrupt turns at the walk. The onset is most commonly around the age of 7 to 10 months. In Dobermans it may not show up until they're 5 years old! As the disease progresses, the forelegs can become involved. Some of the other neurological tests that a vet should do are to turn the rear foot over so that it is resting on the ground on it's top. If the dog doesn't immediately right it, you could

be looking at wobblers syndrome. If the head is tipped up and back, it will often elicit a pain reaction. That's the first symptom I noticed in my first wobbler. She yelped and collapsed in a heap on the floor! Her name was Sunflower and she was one of the first I ever bought as a show/breeding bitCh. She was lovely. I began to notice a sort of "bouncing" motion in her rear movement. Her condition gradually worsened until at the age of 5 years, she had to be euthanized.

After her initial examination she was sent home with a neck brace which terrified her. I decided that if she was going to have to be uncomfortable, she'd be better off dead, so I took it off. She ran, played, leaped in the air and even carried 20 pound road markers around in her mouth! She never had any pain, even at the end. She just started to fall over and I couldn't stand it anymore.

My second wobbler came from my first litter. Another show beauty who's symptoms showed up around 7 months of age. Heather was placed in a loving home and lived to the ripe old age of 9 years never getting any worse. The most unusual showed up in a bitch puppy around the age of 5 WEEKS! I'd never seen nor heard of actual symptoms that young, but I never liked her movement and by the time she was about 6 weeks, she was being easily knocked down by her littermates all the time. She was so tough and plucky that I couldn't bring myself to put her down even though I figured she'd just get worse. I placed her with a good friend who had been around Sunflower and knew what to expect, except we really didn't

know in this case. Sadie was put to sleep recently at the ripe age of 9 years, having lived a long and happy life. What was amazing to me, was that she improved to the point that you really wouldn't have noticed she was a wobbler unless you were looking for it. What's interesting is that one of Heather's full sisters was the dam of Sadie and the other full sister, Daffodil, never produced a wobbler, nor have I had any since then.

Although I don't think there's a lot of doubt that it has some genetic causes, I think that the way a young dane is fed, and the body condition it is kept in from puppyhood, has A LOT to do with these health/growth problems. Sadie's litter was the very last time I used higher protein for puppies. I can't help but think that my current program of 23% protein throughout their lives except for pregnant/nursing bitches, has helped as I've had no problems since. So the bottom line here is that in my experience wobblers can live long, normal, pain free lives. Recently I was made aware of this [fantastic web site](#) that deals with SUCCESSFUL alternative treatment of a Doberman with wobblers syndrome. If you're considering surgery, PLEASE read this first!