

Dear Dr. Wise:

Question: We have a nine-year-old mixed breed dog. Ritchie weighs about 35 pounds and is slightly overweight. He had been whining a lot and hesitating to walk. We took him to our veterinarian who said Ritchie had a slipped disk in his lower back. He prescribed pills which seem to make Ritchie feel better. Can you explain what is going on?

Answer: Ritchie is not alone; many dogs suffer from the same problem. Each vertebrae of the spine is separated by a disk which acts as a cushion between these bones.

These disks can rupture allowing the material inside to extrude against the spinal cord and/or the nerve roots which run just above the vertebrae and disk. When this happens, the nerves inside the spinal cord get pinched and cannot function properly.

This results in pain and, if severe enough, can cause partial or total paralysis. The severity depends on how much disk material is pinching against the nerves. It sounds as if Ritchie was not severely affected.

The pills he takes probably are steroids to remove the inflammation around the nerves caused by the disk material. In other words, the tissues around the nerves as well as the nerves themselves become swollen and damaged. This condition must be relieved to enable the nerves to return to normal function. The damage to these nerves also caused pain for Ritchie. As the pills reduced the swelling, the pain subsided.

Some breeds of dogs are more prone to ruptured disks. Dachshunds with their long backs are especially prone and are a good example of a purebred dog which can develop disk disease at an early age. Radiographs sometimes are helpful to determine areas of the spine which are affected. Myelograms can actually outline where disk material is pressing against the nerves of the spinal cord.

It sounds like Ritchie is responding exceptionally well to treatment. Be sure to watch him closely for further signs of problems. You mentioned that he was overweight. It would be very good to get him down to trim body size to reduce the stress on his back.

Treatment with medicine usually produces good results with disk problems. Occasionally the disk material must be removed surgically to achieve recovery, but this step usually is reserved for dogs that are paralyzed.

If you have a question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, at the Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201. Capitol Ave., Ste # 405, Indianapolis, IN 46225