

Perianal Fistulas is not a Surgical Problem

By Jacki Wheeler, RN, MSN, AWSA Health and Genetics Chair

Perianal Fistula is also known as anal furunculosis. In the past, it was believed that this disease was due to broad tails that were low lying, therefore the treatment was to amputate the tail. In more recent times, in fact still today, some vets would recommend surgical removal of these lesions. However, in the mid to late 1990's research done at Michigan State University and at Ontario Veterinary College (University of Guelph Canada) identified that a medical treatment had a better success rate and was much less invasive than the surgical approach.

Perianal fistula is a chronic inflammatory, ulcerative disease of the perianal tissues that is seen almost exclusively in the German Shepherd/White Shepherd dog. The exact cause of this disease has not been determined thus far. Many studies have investigated a variety of possible causes such as immunologic, bacteriologic, endocrine or anatomic for this serious disease.

As a result, many treatment methods have also been tried without routine success. Until the 1990's medical treatment was only 'helpful' at best. Surgical treatments also were tried without much success and offered a number of serious complications such as anal stricture formation, and fecal incontinence, not to mention a painful recovery process. Many newer treatment methods include hypoallergenic dietary regimen, Prednisone, Cyclosporin, and Tacrolimus ointment individually or in some combination.

At Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, a Cyclosporin protocol has been developed and is showing good results (85% cure rate) in the treatment of anal fistulae. The study undertaken at Guelph was to evaluate the efficacy of Cyclosporin treatment for perianal fistula in the German Shepherd dog. This was a prospective, randomized, double-blind, controlled study. Initial results after four weeks, showed a significant resolution of the disease in the Cyclosporin treated dogs when compared to the placebo treated controls. After four weeks, the placebo treated dogs were switched to Cyclosporin therapy and demonstrated marked resolution of their disease.

The results of this study so far are that perianal fistulae in the White Shepherd dog is an immune-mediated disease because the treatment protocols are directed toward suppression and/or modification of the immune response. Further studies (long term) are needed to see how effective this treatment protocol is in the long run.

I have two dogs that have had perianal fistulas. The oldest girl Dinah was three years old when she started treatment and has been symptom free for three years. She was treated with 16 weeks of Cyclosporin. My youngest dog, Abby now 2 1/2 (Dinah's half-niece) was just diagnosed with this disease. I am starting her on Cyclosporin next week. The symptoms you can see are: darkened hair around the anus (larger area than usual) increased anal licking, painful or bloody stools, and constipation. Unfortunately, many vets are not yet familiar with this protocol.

Because this is an expensive disorder (\$1200) for many dog owners and a painful disorder for the dog, I personally recommend spay/neuter for any dog that is affected with this disorder.

It is thought to be a polygenic, genetic disorder. Also, some of the literature and vets I have talked with believe that the ebb and flow of the heat cycles in the female and the high testosterone levels in the male may contribute to recurrences.

If you have, or had, a dog affected with this disease, please report it for inclusion in the genetic disease charts. You can report this disease, or any other disease, by phoning Joanne Chanyi at 519-847-5206 or http://wsgenetics.org/submit_health.html. Join our discussion group at

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/WhiteShepherdGenetics>.