

Walter's pancreas problems

Case Study—December 2011

Walter is a very lively nine year old castrated male Dachshund. Over the last few years, he has become a regular friendly little face at our veterinary surgery...which is very typical for dogs who suffer from his condition. His mum is very happy she has Pet Insurance to help cover some of the costs associated with Walters' treatments.

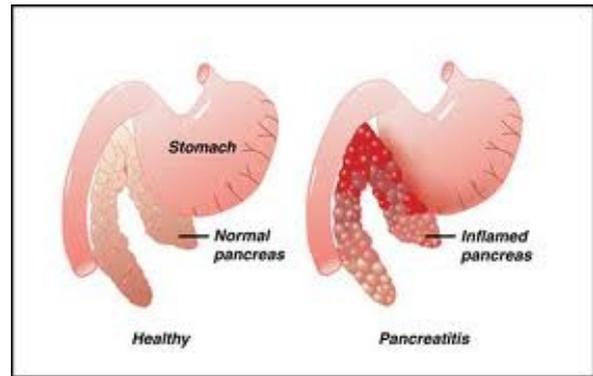
His story began a few years ago when Walter presented to us with unexplained weight loss despite a good appetite. He was otherwise a happy little dog, with no other problems according to his mum. After a full check over by one of the veterinarians, some blood, urine and faecal tests were done, and that's when his most troublesome problem was first diagnosed. Walter had increased levels of canine specific pancreatic lipase (spec CPL) and was diagnosed with CHRONIC PANCREATITIS or low-grade inflammation of the pancreas. This was also confirmed with an ultrasound of his abdomen, showing a thickened pancreas with swelling of the fat around it too.

The pancreas is a gland located near the stomach, and it has 2 main functions. The production of insulin to regulate glucose (sugar) in the blood, and the production of digestive enzymes which breakdown food in the intestine. If there is not enough insulin produced, pets will develop Diabetes, and if there is not enough digestive enzymes produced, pets will not be able to absorb their food properly and weight loss can occur.

Like Walter, many dogs with chronic low-grade pancreatitis will show vague signs and it is very difficult to detect. Walter was treated with the addition of digestive enzymes to his food, and started on a low fat diet to reduce the workload of the pancreas and aid weight gain. He was monitored closely over the following months with repeat blood tests, and regular weight checks and his pancreatitis settled down. These treatments are continued for the rest of his life, and Walter is a healthy happy little dog.

However, from time to time over the last few years, Walter has also had episodes of the more serious ACUTE PANCREATITIS. If he eats anything too high in fat he becomes very sick indeed. The last 2 episodes were triggered when he cheekily raided the bin and ate some goat cheese, and the second time, after chewing on some bones for his teeth (marrow is very rich). These fatty foods cause an overload of the pancreas and it accidentally releases digestive enzymes into the blood stream and into the gland itself...we liken this to putting battery acid into the abdomen (ouch!!!)

His symptoms were the sudden onset (usually overnight) of a dull depressed dog, unwilling to eat, a tense, painful abdomen, with vomiting and/or diarrhoea. These symptoms can also occur with inflammation of other abdominal organs, including the stomach, intestines, liver and kidneys from a variety of causes.



A full examination with one of the veterinarians confirmed severe abdominal pain in the front part of his abdomen, and Walter was running a fever. Blood tests and abdominal ultrasound once again, were necessary to rule out other causes of abdominal pain and confirm a diagnosis of acute pancreatitis.

This is a potentially life threatening disease because dogs can become septic or toxic from the red angry pancreas releasing enzymes, which in turn causes shut down of other organs. There is no treatment for pancreatitis other than to support the pancreas until it heals itself, and monitor and treat any sepsis which may occur.

On each bout of acute pancreatitis, Walter was hospitalised for a few days on an intravenous drip to help flush the pancreas and correct any dehydration. He was not allowed to eat or drink anything for at least 48 hours, because any stomach fill triggers the pancreas to release more digestive enzymes. Pain relief, antibiotics and drugs to stop vomiting were given, and Walter made a full recovery. He was gradually started back on water and food and was sent home on his usual low fat diet and digestive enzymes.

Whilst we are unsure of the exact cause of pancreatitis in Walters' case, we know that fatty foods were the biggest trigger. He now snacks on carrots as a treat and has his teeth brushed daily. In fact, pancreatitis is a disease that puzzles veterinarians worldwide, as an exact cause can not be found. What we do know is that some animals are more prone to developing pancreatitis than others, and it the **biggest risk factors** are: middle-aged, desexed pets who are carrying a bit of extra weight and almost always occurs when a fatty meal is eaten!

We commonly see pets with acute pancreatitis and there is always a spike over Christmas when there are ham bones and turkey carcasses about. We urge you not to feed your pets table scraps, as a bite of a sausage, a cube of cheese or some leftover gravy are much too rich for our pets. Ensuring their weight is under control with a healthy diet and regular exercise will certainly help reduce the chances of them developing this nasty disease..

Walter attended our Christmas in the Park with Santa Paws last weekend and on behalf of his mum, the wonderful supporters of 4 PAWS Animal Rescue and the staff of the Nicklin way Veterinary Surgery, he would like to wish all the pets and their parents, a very "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year".

