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DIAPHRAGMATIC HERNIA

What is it? Diaphragmatic hernia occurs when the diaphragm (the muscle that separates the thorax from the abdomen) is disrupted, allowing abdominal organs to move up into the thoracic cavity. Sometimes if the hole is large enough the organs can slide in and out, sometimes they become trapped in the thorax and can be compromised, sometimes they take up enough room that the lungs cannot expand normally and the animal has trouble breathing.

What animals are affected? Any animal can have a diaphragmatic hernia. There are congenital forms, but most of these are traumatic in origin (hit by car, kicked by horse...).

What are the clinical signs? Signs can include lethargy, inappetance, coughing, dyspnea (difficult respiration), and discomfort. Sometimes there are no signs at all and the hernia is found incidentally on a radiograph. For this reason, we always recommend at least one chest radiograph after an animal has been hit by a car, even if the other injuries involve the hind limbs.

How is it diagnosed? Diagnosis is made with radiographs of the thorax. If there is no obvious evidence of abdominal organs in the thorax but the suspicion is still high, a contrast peritoneogram can be done. This procedure involves injecting sterile dye or contrast material into the abdominal cavity. If contrast shows up in the thorax then you know there is a defect somewhere in the diaphragm.

How is it treated? Treatment involves an abdominal exploratory to bring the herniated organs back into the abdomen followed by repair of the diaphragm to reestablish separation between the body cavities. If the herniated organs have been compromised or are no longer viable, they may need to be removed as well.

What is the aftercare? The patient will remain hospitalized at least one night after surgery and may have a chest tube in place for 8-12 hours to help evacuate air (a result of the surgery) and fluid from the chest. They are monitored very closely for any signs of respiratory distress. Pulmonary edema (fluid within the lung tissue) can develop if the lungs are significantly compromised or reinflated too quickly. Once the patient is discharged, they will have at least two weeks of restricted activity.

What is the prognosis? If the patient survives surgery and the immediate postoperative time, prognosis is very good.

Can it be prevented? Keeping your pet in fenced yard or on a leash when outside will significantly reduce their risk of a vehicular accident or other blunt trauma that may result in a diaphragmatic hernia. Animals with congenital hernias should be spayed and neutered.