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FIBROCARTILAGENOUS EMBOLIS (FCE)

What is it? Fibrocartilagenous embolism is a neurologic condition in which one or more of the small blood vessels to the spinal cord become blocked resulting in a localized area of poor oxygen supply (ischemia) to the spinal cord.

What animals are affected? Typically young to middle-aged large breed dogs are affected, although it can happen in any animal.

What are the signs? The animal may acutely cry out and then have some degree of neurologic deficit ranging from mild weakness to complete paralysis of one or more limbs. Signs are often asymmetrical, meaning that one side is worse than the other. After the initial incident these animals typically are not painful.

How is it diagnosed? FCE is diagnosed based on history, physical and neurologic examinations and ideally MRI of the spine. Many times FCE is diagnosed without an MRI, but ruling out the other causes of acute paresis or paralysis (disk herniation, trauma, spinal tumors...). FCE patients will have a normal myelogram.

How is it treated? Treatment includes anti-inflammatory medications, supportive care and physical rehabilitation. There is not a surgical treatment for FCE.

What after care is needed? Home care for FCE is much the same as hospitalized care depending on the condition of the patient. Physical rehabilitation exercises are imperative and those that are significantly affected (paralyzed) also need assistance with urination.

What is the prognosis? Prognosis depends largely on how severely the spinal cord is damaged and what the clinical signs are. Most dogs that are going to recover will show improvements within the first week. Some dogs recover very rapidly, some take several days to weeks to regain normal function.