

Golden Health

What is Hypothyroidism?

by Kathy Burton

Most of the time, it's a good thing that our dogs can't actually "talk" to us. Can you imagine: "Is it time to eat? Would you throw the ball? Can I have a biscuit? I sure do love that ball. Wanna go for a walk? Did I mention I wanted a snack? Wasn't sure if you heard me. Oh, and pet me please." But even if he tell us what was bothering him healthwise, chances are if it was a thyroid problem, he wouldn't know it.

Underactive thyroid—hypothyroidism—can manifest in a variety of symptoms that may easily be dismissed as allergies or laziness. Some symptoms include:

- weight gain without an appetite increase
- hair loss (especially on the trunk or tail)
- fuzzy "puppy coat"
- poor hair growth, and/or dry brittle coat
- dry, dark or flaky skin
- chronic ear or skin infections.

Hypothyroidism is a disorder in which the thyroid gland (a small, butterfly-shaped two-lobe gland at the front of the neck) secretes insufficient thyroid hormone. The thyroid gland regulates the metabolic rate but has other influences as well—if it is underproducing it can affect other important chemical functions in the body and brain of the dog.

In most cases, hypothyroidism stems from the dog's own immune system attacking the tissues of the thyroid gland. This condition is called *autoimmune thyroiditis*. The dog's own system attempts to compensate for this at first by secreting more and more of the thyroid hormone, but eventually the gland is unable to keep up with the attacks on its tissue, and that's when the symptoms begin to develop.

Thyroid dysfunction may also be the root of behavioral changes and should be tested at the onset of:

- sudden aggression or fearfulness
- anxiety-related or compulsive behavior.

If your otherwise healthy, young or adult dog experiences sudden behavioral changes or the physical symptoms listed, consult your vet and check for an underlying thyroid imbalance. She or he will look for the presence of thyroid auto antibodies and low or borderline levels of total T4 and T2, which can be determined by a simple blood test. A TSH test is no longer recommended, because only the thyroid reserve is measured, which can test normal in the early stages of thyroid disease.

Since the physical signs of hypothyroidism develop gradually and vary from dog to dog, the disorder often goes undiagnosed. Veterinarians have found that hypothyroidism is more common in certain breeds, including Golden Retrievers, and typically develops after 2 years of age. But no longer is it assumed that a dog is too young to have hypothyroidism, because in some cases it can present post-puberty as a result of genetic predisposition (around 9 to 12 months of age). The test results may show a low range of normal.

While all owners should be on the lookout for changes in their dog's appearance or behavior, most vets will recommend—at minimum, even without obvious symptoms—testing as part of a senior health examination beginning at age eight.

Hypothyroidism isn't life threatening, and once diagnosed, the disorder is relatively easy to treat with a daily dose of synthetic thyroid hormone, called thyroxine (levothyroxine). Especially in the initial stages of treatment, blood will need to be drawn periodically to assess the effectiveness of the dosage and make any adjustments necessary. Once thyroid

hormone levels have stabilized within a normal range, your veterinarian will likely check the levels every 6 to 12 months.

Once treatment begins, most hypothyroid dogs are increasingly active and show fewer behavior problems within a week. Hair growth typically accelerates in about a week, too, although bare spots or a poor coat may take months to fully recover. Most dogs begin to lose excess weight within 2 to 4 weeks of starting treatment.

While there is a genetic predisposition for thyroid disorders, environmental factors such as pollutants and overvaccination may play a role as well. Switching the dog to a hypoallergenic "natural" diet, that is preserved with vitamins E and C, and free of chemical preservatives or coloring (e.g., lamb and rice based, lower protein), is highly recommended.

With regularly scheduled check-ups to ensure correct dosage, your dog should be mostly symptom-free for the rest of his life. The treatment for hypothyroidism is straightforward, and the medication is relatively inexpensive. Hypothyroid dogs who receive proper treatment have a normal life span and are able to maintain good health well into their golden years. So even if he can't "tell" you directly what's wrong, his body and behavior will. Hypothyroidism may not be easily diagnosed by physically looking at the dog, but the testing and treatment can be very easy. If you sense that something "just isn't right," chances are it isn't! Have him tested. He'll thank you for it, do a little happy dance, and most likely ask in his own way, "Throw the ball, the ball, the ball! How about that biscuit, now?!"

