Senior Moments: Early Detection, Intervention Key to Managing CDS

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Q Why is canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CDS) underdiagnosed?

A CDS in dogs can trigger a range of behavioral changes. In our practice, the clinical signs of CDS that are most likely to bring dogs through the door are **loss of housetraining** and **sleep/wake cycle disturbances,** because both are distressing and disruptive to the household. While many dogs also experience **changes in social interaction, changes in activity levels** and **disorientation,** these may be more easily overlooked by owners and attributed to aging or other health conditions.

Q Given these challenges, how can veterinarians help ensure dogs with CDS don't slip through the diagnostic cracks?

A Screening with a behavioral assessment is essential, as is conducting a thorough physical examination. Veterinarians see many dogs that may be showing signs of cognitive decline as well as signs of pain from conditions such as osteoarthritis. If we can mitigate the dogs' pain, it can be easier to help them cope with the changes that accompany CDS.

Determining *when* to screen for CDS is another important question. In the past, we conducted assessments when owners reported one or more behavioral signs. I now advocate for conducting these assessments annually or biannually in *all* dogs over the age of 8. Ideally, I also assess dogs by age 7 to get a baseline against which later assessments can be compared.

Q How should intervention be structured, knowing that dogs can be at different stages at diagnosis?

A There are a variety of options that can help manage the clinical signs of CDS in dogs; these include **medication, diet** and **supplements.** Choosing an approach can depend on how quickly a response is needed as well as how much time and effort the owner is willing to invest. Dogs with concurrent medical conditions requiring medications and/or therapeutic diets may require a customized strategy.

For dogs with advanced clinical signs, I may recommend a combination of selegiline, Purina® Pro Plan® Veterinary Diets NC NeuroCare™ Canine Formula and a supplement such as Senilife®. If the dog is struggling with anxiety, I may add gabapentin, Purina® Pro Plan® Veterinary Supplements Calming Care or—in select cases—a benzodiazepine. Finally, any dog with CDS will also benefit from behavioral management (see "Helping dogs cope with cognitive loss").

Q How important is early diagnosis and intervention with CDS?

A Like any condition that is progressive, the earlier we identify it, the better. We're not going to cure CDS but we can manage the clinical signs. The goal is to keep the dog's condition from deteriorating further and to intervene before clients are at their wits' end or the dog is suffering.

My goal is to keep dogs and clients *out of crisis.* If the dog is up all night and howling—or is having accidents all over the house—that puts the household in crisis mode, which isn't conducive to good decision-making. Once owners understand that clinical signs can improve and they can still live with the dog for a number of years, their attitude becomes more hopeful.

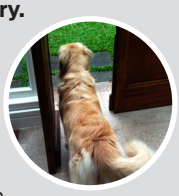
Helping dogs cope with cognitive loss

With loss of cognitive function, dogs can easily become disoriented and forget previous training. The following can help them get back on track:

Maintain a routine that the dog can stick to. Keep meals, play and walks on a schedule.

Make the environment comfortable. Elevate food dishes and ensure the dog won't slip on stairs or in hallways.

Re-housetrain if necessary. Older dogs can be trained just like puppies. Ensure they can easily go outside, encourage them to go out often and reward them with treats within a few seconds of elimination.



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Early Intervention Benefits the CDS Patient and the Family

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Canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CDS) is a serious condition that impairs quality of life for dogs as well as the bond between people and their pets. Early diagnosis and intervention offer the best hope to improve clinical signs.

Lack of awareness limits diagnoses

Far too often, dog owners whose dogs have CDS assume that the subtle behavioral changes they're seeing are the unavoidable result of aging. Because clients simply aren't aware of the disease and don't bring the clinical signs to the veterinarian's attention, CDS often goes undiagnosed.

As veterinarians, we also have much to learn. I wasn't familiar with CDS right out of veterinary school, so I didn't know what questions to ask. Since then, my education took on a personal aspect. My own dog, Bruno, suffers from CDS, and I have seen firsthand how multimodal management enhanced his physical and cognitive health.

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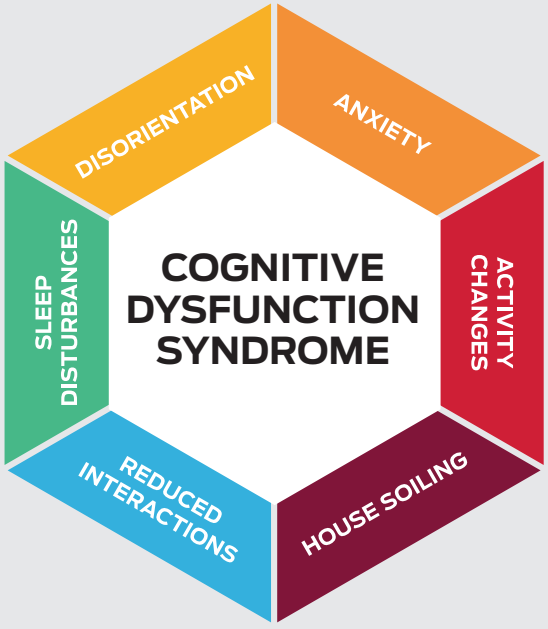
CDS affects dogs *and* families

Because CDS clinical signs can profoundly impact the human-animal bond, it's important to support canine brain health. Certain behaviors, such as changes in activity, anxiety, disrupted sleep cycles and house soiling, may negatively affect how a pet is handled or housed. Sadly, dogs with CDS may be isolated from everyday activities to prevent household damage and made to sleep away from the family to minimize nighttime disruptions.

Bruno's story

I started my mixed-breed dog, Bruno, on Purina® Pro Plan® Veterinary Diets NC NeuroCare™, a therapeutic diet indicated for the nutritional management of CDS, when he was 10 years old. One of the primary symptoms we noted was anxiety, so we made several adjustments to our household to help him cope. Because he does best when he's close to me, he spends a fair amount of time with me in my home office. We also allow him to avoid the hustle and bustle of visitors and our active children. Bruno is also given Purina® Pro Plan® Veterinary Diets Calming Care Canine Probiotic Supplement to help him maintain calm behavior.

Behavioral changes from CDS can affect the human-animal bond.



Anecdotally speaking, I didn't realize how well Bruno was doing on the diet until recently, when I temporarily fed him another food for a few weeks. Now 12 years old, he appeared anxious and disoriented. We saw his social interactions decline and he was only comfortable around me and my husband. Bruno's housetraining also deteriorated. This otherwise-healthy dog who had never had an accident in the house started going upstairs to relieve himself in the bedrooms. Fortunately, after 30 days back on the diet, Bruno began slowly improving. Now, after two months, he's almost back to his normal self and the disorientation and house soiling are nearly gone. To further alleviate house soiling, we installed a doggie door so he can go out to relieve himself without our assistance.

Learning through experience

Witnessing the severity of these clinical signs in my own dog provided a real-world lesson about the effect that CDS can have on quality of life for a dog and his human family. It reinforced that assessing my patients for CDS is just as important as the other tests performed at routine exams.

Proactive, Multimodal Approach Can Take a CDS Diagnosis from Hopeless to Hopeful

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Learning that a beloved dog has canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CDS) can be difficult for clients. However, I've found that being proactive in diagnosing CDS and using a multimodal approach to managing dogs with the disease can make a positive difference in the outcome achieved.

Start the conversation early

As veterinarians, we do a good job of talking with clients about the physical changes aging can bring about in their dogs. But we also should alert clients to the behavioral changes that could signal cognitive decline so they can recognize and report them. I typically start this conversation with a client at their dog's 7-year checkup.

At this point, I also recommend clients consider a diet that supports brain health, such as Purina® Pro Plan® Bright Mind®, even if they haven't noticed behavioral changes. Bright Mind contains enhanced botanical oils shown to promote alertness and mental sharpness in dogs 7 years of age and older, plus a blend of brain-supporting nutrients that includes antioxidants. An added benefit of Bright Mind is glucosamine to help support joint health and mobility.

Adopt a multimodal approach

Once a dog reaches the point of showing clinical signs of CDS, it's time for a multipronged strategy. I often start with Purina® Pro Plan® Veterinary Diets NC NeuroCare™, which contains medium-chain triglyceride oil and a blend of nutrients that help support cognitive health. Some clients report that their dogs with CDS are more engaged with them, are more active during the day and sleep better at night when they feed them NeuroCare.

Other components of a CDS management program include regular exercise and environmental enrichment. Dogs with CDS often have comorbidities such as obesity and/or arthritis, so it's important to formulate a plan that addresses all issues to give dogs the best possible quality of life moving forward. Low-impact activities such as walking or swimming are ideal for older dogs, both physically and mentally. Meanwhile, new toys can provide additional mental stimulation.

For patients that require additional intervention, I may prescribe selegiline or a supplement such as SAMe to help dogs showing signs of CDS. If clients want to try other supplements like ginkgo biloba or melatonin, we evaluate each one on an individual basis. Whatever approach is chosen to manage dogs with CDS, it's important to manage client expectations. Specialized nutrition, environmental enrichment and medications work well for many—but not all—dogs.

Share success stories

I like to share my own story with clients because I believe it helps them when they see their veterinarian has been through a similar experience. I took over the care of Gracie, a relative's terrier mix, when she was 10 years old and showing signs of CDS. Because of her owner's work commitments, Gracie was often home alone. I started offering her NeuroCare and began taking her for walks. She also socialized with my other two dogs. Within two to three months, Gracie had more energy during the day and was able to sleep through the night.

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Key Takeaways

- Routine CDS screening in dogs over the age of 8 helps facilitate early diagnosis and ensure that intervention—including nutrition, supplements, medications and behavioral management—can be implemented before clinical signs become severe.
- Early diagnosis and intervention offer the best hope to improve clinical signs.
- Using a multimodal approach—including a specialized diet, regular exercise, environmental enrichment, and medication or supplements—to manage dogs with CDS can make a positive difference in the outcome achieved.

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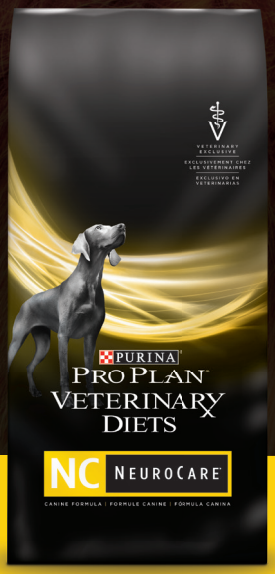
WHAT IF...

WE COULD IMPROVE THE SIGNS OF COGNITIVE DYSFUNCTION SYNDROME?



In a clinical study, dogs with Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (CDS) were fed a test diet containing a unique blend of nutrients and MCT vegetable oil; after 90 days, dogs significantly improved across all categories of clinical CDS signs.

That inspired us to create Purina® Pro Plan® Veterinary Diets NeuroCare.

Enhanced with a unique blend of nutrients and medium-chain triglyceride vegetable oil

EPA + DHA, omega-3 fatty acids, to help support brain health

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