

## Six Signs of Doggy Dementia and What to Do

There are six top signs of canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CCDS), a very common condition in older dogs. Similar to Alzheimer's disease in humans, CCDS develops slowly and can be subtle. Know the signs - the sooner you take action and provide effective nutraceutical support, the better.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CCDS) is very common in older dogs; it's estimated that 28% of 11- to 12-year-old dogs and 68% of 15- to 16-year-old dogs have CCDS
- The acronym DISHAL can help you recognize the six top signs of CCDS; it stands for disorientation, interactions, sleep-wake cycle, house soiling, activity changes and learning difficulties/memory loss
- Typically, the signs start out gradually and worsen over time; even though there's no cure, a trip to the veterinarian is important for supportive care
- Regular exercise and mental stimulation, a species-specific, nutritionally balanced diet and targeted nutraceutical support can help optimize your dog's brain health at any age

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Dementia, also known as canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CCDS), is very common in older dogs. It's estimated that 28% of 11- to 12-year-old dogs and 68% of 15- to 16-year-old dogs have CCDS, according to Dr. Brian Gray Barnett, a veterinary research fellow in the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences.<sup>1</sup>

As your dog ages, you may be on the lookout for physical signs of pain and illness, but it's easy to overlook the sometimes-subtle signs of neurodegeneration. CCDS is similar to Alzheimer's disease in humans.

It's progressive with no known cure, but there are steps you can take and treatments to help delay its progression. Familiarizing yourself with its signs and symptoms is the first step, so you can recognize if your dog's brain health may be on a decline.

### Six Signs of CCDS: DISHAL

Some of the signs of CCDS mimic those found in other health conditions, so if you notice any of these, seek veterinary attention to rule out other underlying problems. Endocrine diseases, seizures, musculoskeletal conditions and even gastrointestinal problems are examples of diseases that can lead to physical or behavioral changes similar to those seen with CCDS.

Barnett recommends using the acronym DISHAL to help keep an eye out for the most common, specific signs linked to CCDS. It stands for the following:

1. **Disorientation**, including staring at walls or floors or getting stuck in odd places, like behind furniture
2. **Interactions**, especially those that are abnormal, such as aggression, irritability or changes in frequency of social interactions with familiar family members and pets
3. **Sleep-wake cycle changes**, including sleeping more during the day or difficulty sleeping at night; changes in sleep-wake cycle are often among the earliest signs of CCDS
4. **House soiling**, such as urinating inside the house right after they were let outside or not letting you know when they need to go out
5. **Activity changes**, which may include decreased activity or increased repetitive activities like walking in circles. Anxiety may make activity changes worse
6. **Learning difficulties/memory loss**, such as having difficulty performing tasks they once knew or learning new tricks

Typically, the signs start out gradually and worsen over time. Even though there's no cure, a trip to the veterinarian is important for supportive care.

"Their veterinarian will have the best plan to identify the underlying cause of the behavioral changes and find the best intervention," Barnett said in a news release. "This can include treating a contributing medical condition, maintaining a consistent routine, reducing environmental stress factors, introducing enrichment activities, changing diet, and recommending specific supplements and medications when appropriate."<sup>2</sup>

Barnett and colleagues are working to better understand the aging mechanisms in dogs in order to develop treatment strategies for CCDS. Their Dog Aging Project will follow thousands of dogs for 10 years and is looking for partners interested in enrolling their dogs and filling out surveys about their dog and their dog's experiences.<sup>3</sup>

The ultimate goal is to uncover ways to maximize healthy longevity in our companion animals and even in humans. "We are learning more and more about the changes that happen in the nervous system in dogs with CCDS," Barnett said. "Further understanding not only might allow us to better diagnose and treat CCDS, but we may be able to apply these findings to Alzheimer's disease in humans."<sup>4</sup>

## Supporting Your Dog's Brain Health at All Ages

As with humans, the rate at which your dog ages doesn't always correspond to his chronological age. It's possible for "old" dogs to have sharp brains, especially if they've led a healthy lifestyle for most of their years.

Maintaining activity is paramount, including for senior dogs, providing much-needed mental stimulation and slowing the aging process. Older dogs can swim, go for walks and take part in exercises to maintain strength, flexibility and balance. Appropriate mental stimulation — beyond that provided by physical exercise — is also necessary for optimal brain health.

Food puzzles and treat-release toys are two examples to keep your dog's mind working, but you can also engage them in nose work or training to learn a new skill. Socialization with animals and people is also important and should be a regular part of your dog's senior life — just take care to not overstimulate or overwhelm your pup with too many

new faces or changes at once.

Diet is another factor that shouldn't be overlooked. A species-specific, nutritionally balanced diet that is rich in healthy fats, including omega-3 fatty acids such as krill oil and others such as MCT oil, is very important for cognitive health and will also help your pet maintain a healthy weight — another important aspect of healthy aging.

If your dog has dementia, keep stress to a minimum by maintaining a regular routine for meals, walks and bedtime/wake time, while adding in more daytime activity may help your dog to rest at night if sleep troubles are an issue. Some dogs also sleep sounder if they're allowed in their owner's bedroom.

Nutraceutical support can also be beneficial for dogs with CCDS. I recommend 1/4 teaspoon of coconut oil for every 10 pounds of body weight, added daily to food, along with a source of methyl donors, such as SAME (S-adenosylmethionine), which can assist in detoxification and reduce inflammation. Other supplements to consider include:

- Jellyfish extracts
- Glutathione
- Resveratrol
- Ginkgo biloba
- Phosphatidylserine
- Huperzine A
- Pterostilbene
- Pyrroloquinoline quinone (PQQ)
- Omega-3 fats such as sustainably sourced krill oil

As your dog ages, regular senior wellness checkups — at least twice a year — become increasingly important. Blood tests like an A1c test can keep tabs on your pet's internal organs and metabolic health to find problems early on, while your integrative veterinarian can advise you on the best lifestyle changes to support your aging animal.

## Sources and References

<sup>1,2,4</sup> [Texas A&M University, Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences April 15, 2021](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Dog Aging Project](#)

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