

Hypothyroidism and Your Dog

By Brooke Crosier, DVM

What is hypothyroidism?

Hypothyroidism is a relatively common disease of the endocrine system generally seen in middle aged to older dogs. Rarely younger dogs or even cats can be affected. This is generally seen in certain breeds/bloodlines. Hypothyroidism occurs when the patient's immune system targets cells in the thyroid gland that produce thyroid hormone, causing the thyroid hormone level to be low. Dogs with hypothyroidism generally display some classic symptoms: lethargy, decreased appetite, and unintentional weight gain. Some dogs also have coat changes such as a dull coat and/or fur loss, often on the tail/body.

How is hypothyroidism diagnosed?

If we are worried your dog might be hypothyroid we will recommend labwork. This is generally a full blood panel that includes a complete blood count (CBC), a chemistry panel that tells us about your dog's organ function, a total thyroid level (T4), and a urinalysis. This is also done to rule out diseases that can cause similar symptoms such as Cushing's disease, liver disease and diabetes.

Dogs with hypothyroidism will have a low T4, and may have other changes in their labwork including elevated cholesterol and triglyceride levels. It is important to note that T4 levels can be decreased from other diseases apart from hypothyroidism, so to confirm the diagnosis we will recommend checking the "active" portion of thyroid hormone in the blood, which is called a free T4. This is a blood test that we can generally just call the lab to add on. If this also comes back low we can say with certainty that your dog is hypothyroid, and discuss our treatment plan.

How is hypothyroidism treated?

The good news is that hypothyroidism is a very simple disease to treat that offers a very good prognosis. We will prescribe a relatively inexpensive medication called soloxine that supplements your dog's low thyroid levels. It is generally given as a pill twice a day, and will be given for the rest of his life. After your dog has been on this medication for one month we recheck his thyroid level. The blood needs to be drawn 4-6 hours after his morning pill. If the thyroid level is in the normal range we check his thyroid level yearly.

Once the thyroid level normalizes your dog should feel much better. Owners often report their dog has more energy, loses weight, and their coats improve. Dr. Crosier loves to tell people that this is her "favorite disease" to diagnose and treat because these patients do so well!