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Alternatively Speaking: Managing Lyme Disease Dr. Anne Carroll, DVM, CVA

Let's face it; ticks are scary and rightly so. Not only do those eight little legs make my skin crawl but they can carry some pretty serious diseases as well, Lyme being the most infamous. Unfortunately, they are tiny and hard to detect and increasingly everywhere. Our dogs have a high risk of coming into contact with them, even more than ourselves, while running through the tall grass and woods.

It does help to put this concern in perspective when you consider that we do have good tools to deal with Lyme disease in our dogs. First, we have excellent tick protection products to minimize their exposure, including natural products that repel ticks from hitching a ride. When choosing a product you just have to do the proper research and ask the appropriate questions such as "How long will a tick attach before dying?" There are multiple theories as to how long before a feeding tick will transmit disease, but best practice is to certainly not have them attach at all or for as short a time as possible. There is even a vaccine against Lyme disease, but unfortunately there are other equally serious diseases that a tick can still infect your vaccinated dog with. In the end, using a tick preventative product and yearly screening for these tick borne illnesses through a simple blood test allows your veterinarian to best manage your dog's health.

So how worried should you be if your dog contracts Lyme disease? Unfortunately, it is common despite all our efforts. In my clinic in the last two years, one in six dogs tested were positive for Lyme, and one in five have either Lyme, Anaplasmosis or Ehrlichia exposures. As scary as this sounds, the good news is that in both experimental studies of Beagles, and in real life cases, most dogs do not experience significant illness from Lyme disease. At least 85% of infected dogs will not show any symptoms. For those that do, the traditional treatment is a prolonged course of antibiotics (hopefully combined with a good probiotic) and most dogs will respond well. Only the rare cases are there serious issues with Lyme disease, usually in Labradors.

For the average dog, an alternative perspective on Lyme disease is managing the silent effects this infection can have on the body. The infective agent of Lyme disease is a master of disguise, coating itself with the dog's own proteins and then hiding in the joints so it becomes virtually undetectable by the immune system. But some immune activity can be triggered, and since the body can't cure the infection, the defensive immune stimulation can be chronic and cause problems long term. The goal of holistic therapy is targeted at this potential issue and aims to support the joints with good nutrition and supplements, to support the immune system to avoid the harmful reactions that can occur with chronic stimulation, and of course to clear as much infection from the body as possible. Homeopathy is our primary tool to this end, and when used alone or paired with antibiotic use we see very good results.

A patient of mine, Riley, was diagnosed with Lyme at his annual checkup but had no symptoms. His owner was concerned however that this chronic infection may cause silent problems. An additional blood test to measure how much Lyme was in his system came back at seven times the level considered a threat so we decided to treat Riley with antibiotics and homeopathy. One year later Riley was still acting fine and we rechecked his Lyme level to see how much it had reduced. A drop of 50% is considered a success for antibiotic therapy alone. Riley actually tested negative for Lyme with zero detectable level. His owner had done a terrific job of keeping new ticks off and the combined therapy helped his body rid the infection far quicker than typically possible. Not every dog will become

negative like Riley, but a good percentage will convert from high to zero or at least below the level of concern as long as new tick bites are prevented.

Alternative treatments become even more valuable for those less common situations where the infection is causing problems. Repeated tick bites and high numbers of Lyme agents can trigger changes in the joints as well as a stronger immune response in an attempt to clear the infection. When this happens we see the classic Lyme symptoms in dogs including fever, body aches and swollen joints. Not all of these issues are caused by the Lyme infection itself, but by the immune reaction the body is mounting against it. Usually antibiotics would take care of this situation, but issues do come up with conventional treatment. Another patient of mine, Cassie, was an active and happy Golden Retriever until she contracted Lyme disease. The first six months after testing positive she seemed ok, but after that she was tired, lame, and running a fever. Her veterinarian prescribed antibiotics, which did help her symptoms, but she could not tolerate the medication and became ill again when they had to be discontinued. Several drugs were tried, each no better than the last. For over a year she was chronically affected and unable to go on her favorite hikes and so listless that she did not even care. When we finally saw her she was treated with homeopathy and acupuncture for the Lyme and she responded immediately. She was a new dog. She continued acupuncture for several treatments and within months she was acting like a puppy again and able to run and play. Her improvement held for years beyond her treatments.

Another patient, Scout, was a different situation. She had Lyme disease with the classic symptoms and was able to tolerate antibiotics, which did seem to work at first. However, she kept relapsing over a two-year period. This was probably in part due to repeated tick exposures or perhaps her immune system was hypersensitive to the infection hiding in her joints. Over time the antibiotics were less effective. Her energy level was low, she did not want to play, and she was having intermittent lameness issues despite using homeopathic and antibiotic therapies. At first we thought it was something other than the Lyme disease because her levels were not very high. Finally we treated her with a different homeopathic remedy for the chronic condition and she responded very well. In the past year she has had some minor arthritis complaints, but she is energetic and her tail is wagging high for a ten year-old Retriever.

Holistic practitioners have a different arsenal of treatments when it comes to battling Lyme disease. As with all patients, each one should be evaluated individually to determine what the best approach is for both prevention and, if needed, dealing with Lyme disease infection. Like it or not, ticks are here to stay and their presence will only be more widespread as time passes. Short of moving to the desert to escape them, we will have to focus our healthcare to include protection from ticks, and herbal, nutritional and homeopathic therapies to prevent and treat infections spread by tick bites.

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she practices both conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. Her associate Dr. Betty Jo Black brings classical homeopathy to the practice. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at www.chelseanimalhospital.com