

Pet.Med HPLL Workflow: Intervertebral Disc Disease (IVDD) in Dogs

Symptoms

Q: What are the signs my dog might have a slipped or herniated disc?

A: Dogs with IVDD often show **back or neck pain**, reluctance to jump, yelp when picked up, or develop **weakness or paralysis** in the legs. In severe cases, they may lose bladder or bowel control, leading to incontinence.

Breeds like **Dachshunds and Corgis**—with long backs and short legs—are especially prone to this condition because of the extra stress on their spine.

Diagnosis

Q: How does my veterinarian diagnose IVDD?

A: Diagnosis begins with a **neurologic examination**, where your vet checks for pain, reflexes, and limb coordination.

X-rays may show narrowed spaces between the vertebrae, suggesting a disc problem.

For **definitive diagnosis**, imaging such as an **MRI or CT scan** is often recommended to locate the exact disc and assess spinal cord compression.

Important: TIME IS CRITICAL—if surgery is being considered, **each day of delay will reduce the chances of your pet's full recovery.**

Initial Treatment

Q: What happens once IVDD is diagnosed?

A:

- **Mild cases:**
 - Strict crate rest to rest the spine,
 - pain control, typically gabapentin
 - drugs to reduce muscle cramping like Robaxin
 - anti-inflammatory medications, typically steroids, are essential.

- **Moderate to severe cases:** Referral for **neurosurgery** (hemilaminectomy or similar procedure) may be needed to remove pressure on the spinal cord. Early intervention is the key—dogs that can still walk have a much higher chance of recovery if treated promptly.
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When Surgery May Be Required

Q: When should decompressive spinal surgery be considered?

A: If your pet is **acutely paralyzed**, or if **moderate spinal symptoms fail to improve**, **decompressive spinal surgery** may be necessary. The goal of surgery is to **remove pressure from the spinal cord**. This typically involves removing a portion of the **bony tunnel** (vertebral arch) surrounding the spine, which allows the surgeon to physically remove the disc material causing compression and gives the spine more room to heal. The **sooner** this surgery is performed, the **better the chances of regaining function**.

Surgical Outcomes and Recovery Rates

Symptoms	Duration	% Recovery Without Surgery	% Recovery With Surgery
Mild/moderate pain	< 7 days	80–90%	90–95%
Mild/moderate pain	> 7 days	60–70%	90–95%
Partial paralysis, weakness	—	30–40%	80–90%
Paralysis but can feel	< 3 days	< 25%	80–90%
Paralysis but can feel	> 3 days	< 20%	60–70%
Paralysis, no feeling	< 24 hours	< 5%	50%
Paralysis, no feeling	> 24 hours	< 5%	< 20%

Postoperative Care

Q: What kind of care does my pet need after surgery?

A: Postoperative recovery is as important as the surgery itself. Your pet's care will typically include:

- **Pain relief**, either injectable or oral.
 - **Nursing care**—helping your pet get up, move, and stay clean. At **Mission Animal Hospital**, we provide **harnesses** for post-op support.
 - **Laser therapy** every 2–3 days to promote healing.
 - **Physical therapy and rehabilitation** to rebuild strength and coordination.
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Assessing Surgical Success

Q: How will we know if surgery has been successful?

A: Surgical success cannot always be determined immediately. The **return of normal neurologic function** may take **days to several weeks**.

The outcome depends on four main factors:

1. Whether **permanent spinal cord damage** occurred before surgery.
 2. How quickly the **pressure was removed** from the spinal cord.
 3. The quality of **postoperative care**.
 4. Your pet's **motivation and participation** in recovery.
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Lifestyle and Chronic Management

Q: How can I help prevent future episodes or manage my dog's condition long-term?

A:

- **Avoid jumping, stairs, and slippery floors** (use ramps, carpet runners, or yoga mats for traction).
- **Maintain a healthy weight** to minimize spinal stress.
- **Supportive harnesses** can help reduce strain on the neck and back. One brand that Dr. Kevin likes is “Blue Dog Help-M-Up harnesses”

- **Low-impact exercise** (like leash walks or hydrotherapy) helps maintain muscle without overloading the spine.
 - Long-term, be alert for any signs of back pain or weakness—**recurrence is probable**, especially in long-bodied breeds.
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