

Vestibular Disease

The vestibular system is primarily responsible for keeping the head and body in the correct orientation with respect to gravity. This system will alert the brain if we are standing, sitting, lying down, falling, spinning in circles, and keeps the body balanced. The vestibular system is comprised of nerves that start in the brain and continue to the inner ear. The sensors in the inner ear are responsible for informing the brain about any movement. Vestibular disease affects the ability of the brain to recognize abnormal body positions and also affects the brain's ability to correct these abnormalities.

Signs of vestibular disease in pets can include:

- Circling (spinning or walking in circles)
- Standing with an exaggerated wide stance
- Head tilting
- Falling or rolling to one side
- Involuntary drifting eye movements or squinting
- Ataxia (stumbling, staggering, or lack of coordination without weakness or involuntary spasms)
- Head shaking
- Vomiting
- Motion sickness—perhaps evident when your dog is no longer an enthusiastic companion on car rides

Causes

Vestibular disease can affect an animal very suddenly. Due to the signs of head tilt, circling and staggering, many owners feel their pet has had a stroke. Fortunately, strokes are rare in animals. Veterinary care should include diagnostic tests and subsequent treatment recommendations. Other disorders that result in signs similar to vestibular disease include but are not limited to:

- Inner ear infections
- Thiamine deficiency
- Head trauma
- Middle ear polyps
- Middle ear cancer

Diagnostic tests are needed to determine the presence of an underlying disease or cause for the vestibular disorder and to differentiate vestibular disease from other disorder affecting the balance system of the body. Vestibular disease, for which an underlying cause cannot be determined after thorough diagnostic evaluation, is called idiopathic

How can I help my pet?

During the acute phase of IVD, several different drugs are available to relieve nausea and vomiting until the disorder has time to resolve on its own. Steroids are not normally recommended. Sedatives can be prescribed to help manage severe disorientation, balance and coordination difficulties. No particular treatment protocol has been shown to speed up the course of idiopathic vestibular disease in dogs. If accompanying bacterial or fungal infection is found, certainly antibiotics or antifungal medications can be helpful. Surgical options are available to remove tumors, polyps or infected tissues in the vestibular system, depending upon their location. However, dogs with IVD usually are treated on an outpatient basis and recover spontaneously.