ELBOW DYSPLASIA
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Elbow dysplasia is a syndrome of developmental defects that may be observed in young, actively growing large breed dogs. It is comprised of three different abnormalities including un-united anconeal process, fragmented coronoid process, and osteochondrosis of the elbow joint. Only one of these conditions needs to exist for a diagnosis of elbow dysplasia. Some affected dogs have one or two of the above conditions. Others may have all three conditions concurrently.

Elbow dysplasia can manifest itself at any age. However, it is commonly diagnosed in young dogs. Owners may first notice that the dog has some stiffness in the front legs. This may be more pronounced after exercise or in cold or damp weather. There is usually a progression to pain and lameness. Eventually, arthritis develops in most affected dogs. Diagnosis of elbow dysplasia is based on history, physical examination, and radiographs (x-rays). Physical examination may find pain upon manipulation of the elbow. There may be decreased range of motion, swelling, and eventual crepitus (crunching noise heard when the joint is manipulated). Radiographs give a definitive diagnosis in most cases. Many dogs must be sedated in order to obtain diagnostic images due to pain, stiffness, or anxiety associated with obtaining radiographs.

Unfortunately, there is no cure for elbow dysplasia. We can attempt to manage the pain associated with the condition. However, some dogs have a decreased life span due to the discomfort and debilitation associated with this disease. Dogs with elbow dysplasia are usually not athletic as a result.

Elbow dysplasia is a disease in which the occurrence depends on many factors (multifactorial). Genetics plays a role as is evidenced by multiple dogs from the same families developing the disease. Environment plays a role also. Controlling the dog’s diet and keeping their body condition lean may decrease the likelihood of development of clinical elbow dysplasia. Controlling exercise during growth and development may also lessen the likelihood of clinical disease development.

Although there is no cure for elbow dysplasia, we can attempt to prevent further cases through informed and responsible breeding. Routine screening of all animals prior to breeding is recommended. Many dogs don’t show obvious signs of elbow dysplasia until two years of age. Therefore, screening and subsequent breeding should be done after two years of age. Breeding only dogs from litters where no elbow dysplasia is present reduces its incidence the best.