

Steroid Responsive Meningitis Arteritis

by Dr. Carrie Journey DVM, DACVIM (Neurology)

SUMMARY:

- 1) This is a group of diseases that affect mostly young medium to large breed dogs. It is particularly common in Boxers and Beagles.
- 2) This is generally a treatable disease. Most dogs will be cured of the disease in 6 to 8 months, but some dogs require life long treatment.
- 3) Please monitor your pet carefully, give medication on schedule and contact your veterinarian with any concerns.

EXPLANATION:

Steroid Responsive Meningitis Arteritis (SRMA) is a disease that usually causes spinal pain, most often in the neck, and fever.

SRMA is diagnosed with imaging (CT or MRI scan), a spinal tap and by ruling out infections with special blood work. In some pets we will also recommend a joint tap and culture. MRI may show inflammation of the covering of the spinal cord after contrast or may be normal. Spinal fluid will show too many white blood cells, specifically a type of cell called a neutrophil, when examined by a pathologist. Initial tests may take up to 10 business days to come back from the lab, so often we will start patients on broad spectrum therapy (both steroids and antibiotics) while we wait for test results.

In SRMA the immune system is attacking the covering of the spinal cord (meninges) and joints like there is an infection, but there is no infection. This is what we call an auto-immune disease. Basically, the immune system has made a mistake and is attacking the body like it's an enemy invader. We treat this disease with immunosuppressive drugs.

There are a lot of different treatment regimens that can be used to treat SRMA, but most involve using a type of steroid, for instance prednisone or dexamethasone. Some pets will also be placed on a second medication to help control the immune system if their symptoms are not controlled on steroids alone or if they cannot tolerate steroids. This second medication lets us use less steroid over time, which is helpful because steroids can have side effects when used long term and/or at high dose. Examples of the second medication that your veterinarian might recommend include mycophenolate, cyclosporin, azathioprine, and leflunomide. Your pet will be less able to fight infections on these drugs and vaccination may not be recommended.

PROGNOSIS:

These disease are treatable. Most dogs will do well, becoming normal in the first month of treatment. We very slowly lower their drug doses over a period of about 6 to 8 months. Ideally, before we stop drugs entirely, we will repeat a spinal tap and/or joint taps. Some dogs do need a small amount of medication life long. Very rarely a patient does not respond to therapy.



MONITORING:

Regular check ups with your veterinarian will be important in monitoring your pet's health. Especially early on. Dr. Journey usually rechecks her patients 1 week after the initial diagnosis and then monthly for the first several months. Further recheck schedule will be dependant on how severely your dog is affected.

Please contact your veterinarian if your pet develops new symptoms or if existing symptoms seem to be getting worse. Symptoms include:

- 1) Pain not controlled by medications
- 2) Difficulty walking
- 3) Seizures
- 4) Change in behavior
- 5) Reluctance to eat or drink
- 6) Vomiting or diarrhea

