

Ticks

Tick Diseases: An Overview

There are many things that make the greyhound breed unique among dogs and

one of those is the fact that most often they spend the majority of their lives in a state other than the one in which they were born and raised.

Most of them spend their first two to five years (or longer) in the states

that have dog racing and it seems those states also have something in

common: ticks. In fact, some of the racing states are noted for their tick infestations. And ticks like dogs.

When you put together these factors you have a situation that is ripe for

high infection rates (over 50% in some areas) in racing greyhounds. Many

of the dogs leave the tracks, moving through the adoption process either

sick with tick borne diseases (TBD) or carrying them with no noticeable

symptoms. Some of these dogs' careers are ended prematurely because they

are sick and cannot run as well as they did before they were stricken. It

is important for the greyhound owner or prospective owner to have some

understanding of TBD, what they can do, how to test for them and how they are treated.

The two most common TBD's in greyhounds are ehrlichiosis and babesiosis.

The two diseases are different from each other in the actual form of

infection but are very similar in most other ways. They both are cyclical,

like malaria, with three primary stages. In the early stage (acute) the

dog commonly (but not always) becomes quite ill with flu-like symptoms and

sometimes unresponsive diarrhea. This may go on for a few weeks or a few

months until either the immune system builds up enough antibodies to fight

it to a standoff or the dog dies. If the dog survives thanks to a good

immune response, the disease will then go into a sort of dormant stage

(subclinical), usually with no symptoms showing. This stage may go on for years; in fact the dog might never be sick from it again in its lifetime.

However, some dogs will exhibit mysterious problems that can baffle many veterinarians, leading to inconclusive tests, incorrect diagnoses and unsuccessful treatments. And sometimes the symptoms will disappear as mysteriously as they appeared. Until the third (chronic) stage. At this time the dog may become seriously ill overnight or gradually, again confusing the veterinarian who is not familiar with these diseases. Usually, the dog dies in this stage.

Early testing for TBD is a simple and painless procedure usually accomplished with a simple blood draw and laboratory testing. However, the blood sample should be sent to a lab that specializes in these tests if the owner hopes to get accurate results. Your veterinarian can contact the lab for the correct procedure to follow if he or she is not familiar with the testing. The test itself consists of searching for and measuring the concentration of antibodies in the blood stream the dog will have developed to fight the foreign proteins present if he has been exposed and results are measured and reported in titers; normally the higher the concentration (titer number) the more likely the veterinarian is to want to treat the dog. This may be incorrect, though, as the titer number actually represents the dog's success in manufacturing antibodies; a dog with a stronger immune system might show a higher titer number but be more healthy than the dog with the lower number caused by a weaker immune response.

The answer to this problem is to treat a dog that tests positive, in my view. The veterinarian in an area not indigenous to ticks may have to be convinced and if that's not possible it's probably a good idea to find a new vet. Especially in the case of babesiosis, many animal doctors are

reluctant to treat a dog that isn't in bad shape and sometimes even one that is. The reason is that the recommended treatment for this disease, Imizol, has in the past caused some dogs to suffer serious side effects. But today, with more treatment experience overall, these stories are mostly a thing of the past. Dosages have been adjusted so that side effects are less likely while maintaining the same success rate and early treatment is advantageous since the dog is still strong and in good overall health (there is no advantage gained by waiting until the dog is obviously ill). For ehrlichiosis the recognized treatment is doxycycline or tetracycline--antibiotics. These are given orally and rarely cause serious side effects. With either disease being considered, early testing will enable the owner to eliminate TBD as a cause of many indeterminate illnesses if the results are negative. If the test results are positive (and not followed right away with treatment) it gives the owner and the veterinarian a known possible cause to eliminate with treatment if a hard-to-diagnose problem should ever occur.

Once treated, the dog will generally never be sick from these diseases unless it is reinfected by being exposed again. And exposure requires that the infected tick feed on the dog for a day or more so proper care taken in prevention should avoid that. If the dog resides in an area known for ticks or travels to such an area a good flea and tick treatment should be applied and these can be purchased easily from an animal clinic or from better pet supply stores or even online. It should be noted here that certain flea and tick preventatives should not be used on greyhounds while other products are perfectly fine to use. (Note: Although less common there are other ways a dog can be infected, i.e. contaminated blood or needles.)

Keep in mind this article is merely a very general overview and was not written by a veterinarian. To learn more about these diseases in detail or if you have further questions please contact your Veterinarian.

Owen Johnson, October 2000