



DOG Watch

Expert information on medicine, behavior and health from a world leader in veterinary medicine

Vol. 17, No. 12 ♦ December 2013

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IN THE NEWS ...

Dogs Work to Detect Early Signs of Ovarian Cancer

Studies have shown dogs can detect cancers of the breast, prostate, colon, bladder and skin. Now researchers at the Penn Vet Working Dog Center and two other university departments are hoping for a breakthrough to detect ovarian cancer.

They're training a Springer Spaniel, German Shepherd Dog and Labrador Retriever to sniff out the disease — chiefly the presence of volatile organic compounds known as odorants that undergo change early in the cancer's development. No effective screening is available today, researchers say, and symptoms of the ovarian cancer often don't become apparent until its later stages.

The dogs train with tissue samples from healthy women and those who have been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The center says the analysis of odorants could help in the early detection of ovarian cancer and reduce the number of deaths. The disease strikes 22,000 women in the U.S. annually and results in 14,000 deaths yearly. ♦

When the Diagnosis Is Arthritis

A few easy, often inexpensive changes at home can make your dog's life less painful and more comfortable

Arthritis creeps up on a dog with signs so subtle that they're easy to miss: rising more slowly from a nap, dashing after a ball less often, perhaps even avoiding a favorite chair.

It hurts to realize that your dog hurts, but you can play an important part in his comfort when the diagnosis is arthritis. Veterinary care and a few easy changes around the house can make his life easier and lessen his discomfort.



The first step: a veterinary visit.

The first step is a trip to the veterinarian to learn the basis of the pain. A physical exam, blood tests, X-rays and other tests can help determine whether the pain is the result of an infection, autoimmune disorder, inherited condition, injury or simply the toll of age.

Cartilage Degrades. All types of arthritis involve degeneration of the cartilage covering the ends of bones in joints. Normally smooth,

(continued on page 4)

Outwitting Animal-to-Owner Diseases

Many don't show symptoms, but they can be prevented with good hygiene, routine worming and prompt treatment of illness

Dogs can transmit a variety of diseases that sicken people. Although some of the diseases, referred to as zoonotic, are rare, others are quite common and more continue to be discovered. Only recently has the veterinary community recognized that Staphylococcus bacteria can be transferred from animals to their owners.

"When an animal has an active staph infection, the organism can get on the hands of people who touch the infected area," says dermatologist William H. Miller, VMD, Medical Director of the Companion Animal Hospital at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "The organism could be transferred to a human if the person didn't wash his or her hands."

Those at Risk. "If there is an immunocompromised individual or child in the house, we recommend that they stay away from the animal while the infection is active," Dr. Miller says. Antibiotics are typically used to treat staph infections, but some strains are resistant to standard antibiotics, and a different course of treatment might be needed.

Transmission of staph infections — like many other zoonotic diseases — can be easily prevented with good hygiene. "In all my 37 years of treating staph infections in animals, I have never gotten an infection because I wash my hands during and after examining each animal," Dr. Miller says.

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SHORT TAKES

A Friendly Robot Can Elicit Favorable Canine Reactions

We dog owners can consider ourselves forewarned: Robots could someday replace us, judging by results of an experiment by the Hungarian Academy of Science and Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. In a study of 41 dogs' reactions to a robot — not a cuddly human-like one but a PeopleBot with a laptop for a head — researchers found that dogs reacted favorably to the robot when it behaved in a friendly manner, such as saying their name.

In the first step in the study, half the dogs watched a positive social interaction, with their owners talking with the robot's pre-recorded voice and shaking its hand. The second group of dogs watched their owners type on the robot's keyboard and receive beeps in return.

Then the dogs interacted with the robot. It indicated a hidden treat by pointing and either being social, saying the dog's name, or being asocial and simply beeping. The dogs were much more inclined to linger and gaze at the social robot. They were also more successful at finding the treats it pointed to.

The researchers believe the dogs took cues about interacting with the robot from their owners but say their study, published in the journal *Animal Cognition*, could be a model for designers of social robots to fine-tune their work, looking at the "sociality and behavior" of their designs, even if they don't have human-like characteristics.

Iowa State, Columbia, Carnegie Mellon and USC are among U.S. universities already exploring robot technology. Not too long ago, a study by St. Louis University found that a dog named Sparky and a robotic dog, AIBO, were nearly equally effective easing the loneliness of nursing home residents and fostering attachments with them.

In the Hungarian experiment, the researchers say the "level of sociality" the robot showed was not enough to elicit the same friendly reactions dogs normally have in their close relationship with humans. But who knows what the future will bring?



ENIKO KUBINYI

Researchers suggest their findings could help designers of social robots — those intended to interact with humans.

Stash Those Detergent Pods

Small dishwasher and laundry detergent pods with clear plastic coatings that dissolve in water can be a health threat to pets. Earlier this year, a 7-month-old boy died after ingesting a pod. In the past two years, at least seven animals died or had to be euthanized after exposure to pod-type products, the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center says.

The number could be higher because callers to the center's hotline (888-426-4435) don't always call back with reports on their animals' survival.

"Most of our cases are with dogs, but we have had a few cat cases, and even one ferret case," says veterinary toxicologist Tina Wismer, DVM, the center's medical director. "Vomiting is the most common thing that we see. There is a risk of aspiration — inhalation of the soap into the lungs."

Dr. Wismer says the number of reported deaths from pods are fewer than cases in which pets ingest regular liquid laundry detergent. The reason: "There is less volume in a single pod." ♦

Holiday Hazards Can Tempt the Curious

They range from 'linear foreign bodies' to lilies, toxic essential oils and exposed electrical cords

Gretchen Schoeffler, DVM, DACECC, won't soon forget the 6-year-old yellow Labrador Retriever who was given his own serving of a holiday dinner. The turkey, gravy and all the trimmings gave the dog more than a bellyache. He landed in the emergency clinic with severe necrotizing pancreatitis, a potentially fatal inflammation of the pancreas that required him to spend more than a month in intensive care and cost his owners tens of thousands of dollars to treat.

The Lab survived against all odds, says Dr. Schoeffler, Emergency and Critical Care Section Chief at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. But he's not the only dog to suffer from holiday-related accidents.

Mild Electrocution. Dr. Schoeffler recalls the 10-week-old, mixed-breed puppy who was lethargic and having difficulty breathing. "We found a linear burn in his mouth and had the owners go home and explore," she says. "They discovered he had chewed a Christmas tree light cord. His signs were classic for mild to moderate electrocution. He was treated for two to three days in the intensive care unit with oxygen supplementation, pain medication and intravenous fluids."

Dogs often love the hustle and bustle of the holidays as much as people, but dangling ornaments, an abundance of rich food and enticing but toxic plants are temptations that can cause serious problems. Follow these expert tips to help keep your dog safe:

◆ **Keep him on a regular diet.** A bite or two of plain turkey won't hurt him, but topping it with fatty gravy or giving him a helping of dressing with onions or mashed potatoes loaded with butter and cream are recipes for disaster. Rich, fatty foods can cause life-threatening pancreatitis, Dr. Schoeffler says. And ingested in

large quantities, onions, along with chives and garlic, can cause gastrointestinal irritation and lead to red blood cell damage.

◆ **Place chocolate out of reach.** Many dogs have a sweet tooth — or simply aren't discriminating about what they eat. Chocolate contains a substance called theobromine that dogs don't metabolize efficiently. Eating chocolate can lead to vomiting, diarrhea and more serious reactions, depending on the type and amount ingested. For instance, milk chocolate contains sugar and other ingredients so it tends to be less toxic than dark chocolate or baker's chocolate, but too much of any kind can be harmful.

◆ **Know that sugar-free isn't safe.** "Xylitol, an artificial sweetener used in chewing gum, is especially toxic to dogs and can kill within hours," Dr. Schoeffler says. Hypoglycemia and fatal liver failure can result.

◆ **Supervise guests.** Don't let them slip your dog any foods he shouldn't have, including cooked bones, which splinter easily, or the aforementioned chocolate or fatty foods.

◆ **Supervise dogs.** Make sure they don't have access to the trash where you threw away the string or paper used to wrap the turkey or ham. Ingesting them can cause serious partial or complete intestinal obstructions requiring emergency surgery.

◆ **Place holiday greenery out of reach.** At best, dogs eat it and throw it up, usually in the middle of your cookie exchange party. At worst, plants such as mistletoe, holly and amaryllis can cause mild to severe vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal discomfort, difficulty breathing



While some dogs enjoy the excitement holiday visitors bring, others would appreciate a quiet room, where they can retreat.

and even death if a dog eats their berries, leaves or bulbs.

◆ **Truss the tree.** To protect it from being knocked over by rowdy dogs, anchor the tree to the ceiling or wall with a bungee cord. You may also want to surround it with an exercise pen to prevent your dog from having access to ornaments or chewable electrical cords. To further discourage chewing, wrap the cords in tough cable covers. And read the label before adding chemical extenders to the water for live trees. They may be toxic to dogs who check out the new water bowl.

◆ **Practice safe scents.** Essential oils are highly toxic. Don't let your dog nibble on potpourri or lap up spilled oils from scent diffusers. Ingesting essential oils can cause severe internal injuries in the form of burns to the mouth and esophagus, Dr. Schoeffler says. And while burning candles may smell inviting, they can cause burns from flames or hot wax if nudged or knocked over by a curious dog and can even start a house fire. Instead, use flameless candles or simmer natural ingredients on the stove to spread a holiday aroma throughout your home. Good combinations include pine or cedar twigs, bay

(continued on bottom of page 4)

ARTHRITIS... *(continued from the cover)*

the cartilage allows joints to move easily. As the cartilage breaks down, the joints don't move as well and bones rub together, resulting in inflammation, stiffness, swelling and soreness.

The condition can develop in all breeds and has no cure — but it can be treated. “Many dogs have arthritis because they have genetic traits that predispose them to it,” says Rory J. Todhunter, BVSc, Ph.D., professor of surgery at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.

Hip dysplasia, for example, inevitably results in arthritis. “My research focus is on how to prevent it,” Dr. Todhunter says. “The only non-genetic thing that we can control in a dog predisposed to hip dysplasia is growth rate. Dietary control of growth should start at weaning.”

Conservative Care. One-quarter of the arthritis cases seen at Cornell could be treated surgically, but most cases are managed more conservatively medically, Dr. Todhunter says. Even surgery, however, calls for an owner's help to make it work. “Arthritis is a global disease, and fiddling around in the joint isn't going to solve it. Once you've got the damage, it's there forever.”

This is where you come in. Here are changes you can make at home to improve an arthritic dog's life. The good news: Most of them don't cost a dime.

◆ **Trim the weight.** “At least every other dog we see is overweight or obese,”

Dr. Todhunter says, adding that getting an arthritic dog to the proper weight may reduce or eliminate the need for medications. “You need to do it slowly and be persistent. Remember the rule is ‘calories in and calories out.’ You have to control caloric intake for the dog to lose weight. Weight control for dogs is just like it is in people, and it's a cheap solution.” It may be as easy



Control of caloric intake is vital to weight loss. Success can often eliminate the need for arthritic patients to take medications.

as following your veterinarian's advice about daily calorie intake for your dog's age and activity.

◆ **Provide exercise.** “In the best of all worlds, we would not give a painkiller; we would build up exercise to prevent pain,” Dr. Todhunter says. He suggests gentle, daily exercise that's kind to aching joints. “The easiest is swimming. Otherwise, walk; the dog doesn't have to run. Go cross-country, up and down trails, where there is

more dirt and grass and less blacktop and concrete to be easier on the dog — and the person.”

There's no such thing as too much exercise, as long as it doesn't leave your dog sore. High-impact play, such as leaping to catch a Frisbee, is off the list for arthritis, however.

◆ **Get a grip.** A slick floor surface poses a hazard to already rickety walking. “Flooring is an issue because as dogs get older, they have trouble gripping,” Dr. Todhunter

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SAFETY

HOLIDAYS ... *(continued from page 3)*

leaves and nutmeg, or cinnamon, cloves and orange peel.

Many dogs enjoy greeting holiday visitors, but others could do without the disruption of their routine and the presence of strangers. The holidays can be just as stressful to dogs as they are to people. Whether your dog is a social butterfly or

a wallflower, he should have access to a quiet room to where he can retreat if visitors overwhelm him or make him anxious, says Pamela J. Perry, DVM, Ph.D., a lecturer in animal behavior at Cornell.

“To keep his stress levels low, maintain his routine as much as possible,” she says. “Spend a few minutes one-on-one with him every day so he knows you

haven't forgotten him. It will likely lower your blood pressure, too.”

What about those cute reindeer antlers? Will wearing them unnerve your dog or pose a hazard to his health? Not likely, unless he chews and swallows them, but his pride might be a little dented. Be sure you tell him how handsome he looks, and he might forgive you. ♦

says. "Hardwood floors are the worst." Rough up slippery floors by adding non-skid runners and area rugs.

◆ **Up, down and around.** "One of the difficult things for a dog with arthritis

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

The Arthritis Foundation, dedicated to the prevention, control and cure of the disease in humans, also addresses canine arthritis, urging owners to watch for their dogs' non-verbal cues and take even subtle changes seriously. Among the signs of the disease in dogs:

- ◆ Favoring a limb
- ◆ Weight gain
- ◆ Difficulty sitting or standing
- ◆ Sleeping more
- ◆ Stiff joints
- ◆ Hesitancy to jump, run or climb stairs
- ◆ Decreased activity or less interest in play
- ◆ Attitude or behavior changes
- ◆ Being less alert

will be stairs," Dr. Todhunter says. A lot of dogs encounter them; a survey of 500 owners done a few years ago for Flexcin, a maker of arthritis pain reliever for dogs, showed that 64 percent of homes with arthritic dogs had two stories.

The easy alternative is to move your dog's life to the first floor. Place his bed in a warm place there. Speaking of beds, firm is better than soft — it makes rising easier.

For an alternative to climbing short staircases, such as the steps from the sidewalk to the porch, consider providing a ramp. You can buy a ramp at a pet store or build a low-angle ramp out of plywood covered with carpet, making sure that both ends of the ramp will stay in place when your dog is on it. The ramp



Ramps can often ease the way up and down a sofa.

can help your dog get into the car without jumping, too.

Small changes around the home play a large role in maintaining a dog's quality of life, Dr. Todhunter says. "What owners do can make a big difference." ◆

TOPS IN TREATMENT: WEIGHT REDUCTION AND MAINTENANCE

In addition to efforts at home to ease your arthritic dog's pain, his veterinarian may offer medical treatments. The No. 1 prescription: weight reduction and weight maintenance, says Rory Todhunter, BVSc, Ph.D., professor of surgery at Cornell. Attention to weight can lighten the workload of sore joints. Dr. Todhunter calls it critical.

After checking the dog for normal kidney and liver function, the veterinarian may prescribe a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug, or NSAID, to lessen irritation in the joints. NSAIDs may produce side effects, such as vomiting, loss of appetite, indigestion and blood

in the stool. Tramadol, which is not an NSAID, is often prescribed at Cornell, Dr. Todhunter says. While side effects are said be rare in dogs, sleepiness is the most common one.

Also on the roster of possible treatments: "A nutraceutical like Cosequin or Dasuquin or a polysulfated glycosaminoglycan like Adequan or Cartrophen under veterinary supervision," Dr. Todhunter says. These supplements are derived from natural sources.

"Stronger pain medication is also available through your veterinarian,"

Dr. Todhunter says. Surgery is the last resort, but it can't cure this progressive disease.

On a hopeful note, physical rehabilitation activities such as hydrotherapy can sometimes offer relief, says board-certified anesthesiologist Andrea L. Looney, DVM, Senior Lecturer in the Section of Pain Management at Cornell. "In fact, along with underwater treadmill hydrotherapy, TENS (transcutaneous electric nerve stimulation) and therapeutic ultrasound, physical rehabilitation activities are also a cornerstone of the weight loss."

DISEASES ... (continued from the cover)

Staph is also what is known as a zoonanthroponosis — otherwise known as reverse zoonosis. That means that in addition to moving from animals to humans, it can also be transferred from humans to animals.

Reverse Zoonosis. In fact, according to Armando Hoet, DVM, Ph.D., Director of the Veterinary Public Health Program at Ohio State University, reverse zoonosis is the main concern with staph infections. “With cases of staph infections rising in the U.S. [in humans], we are starting to see spillover to the companion animal side,” says Dr. Hoet, who is board certified in veterinary preventive medicine. “We’re seeing more cases [in pets], but it’s not because it’s circulating more with the animals. It’s circulating more on the human side. The dogs and cats tend to be the victims.”

Because many zoonotic diseases aren’t required to be reported to state health departments and the Centers for Disease Control (with notable exceptions such as rabies), no reliable estimates are available when it comes to the number of zoonotic diseases passed between dogs and owners. But because owners are increasingly likely to take their pets to veterinarians when they see signs of disease, Dr. Miller says, the small but grow-



HELEN PEPPE PHOTOGRAPHY

Dogs can become infected with *Leptospira spirochete* bacteria from contaminated water, soil, mud or an infected animal's urine.

ing trend toward earlier diagnosis and treatment is likely resulting in a lower frequency of zoonotic transfers.

One problem: Not all zoonotic diseases exhibit observable symptoms. “Owners should know that animals can carry infectious agents without any signs of disease,” Dr. Miller says. “Good personal hygiene, routine worming of pets and prompt investigation and treatment of any disease process in the pet will minimize the frequency of a zoonotic disease.”

Dr. Hoet agrees: “The majority of zoonotic diseases are almost 100 percent preventable by hand washing and personal hygiene.”

These are among diseases that can cause cross-species transmission.

Leptospirosis

Cause: The *Leptospira spirochete* bacteria. The infection can spread throughout the body, infecting the liver, kidneys, central nervous system, eyes and reproductive system. The extent depends on the strength of your dog’s immune system. Dogs typically contract the disease from contaminated water, soil or mud, or contact with an infected animal’s urine.

If your dog is undergoing treatment for the infection, you can take steps to

CAN YOU GIVE YOUR DOG THE FLU?

Public health and veterinary research has frequently focused on zoonotic diseases — those passed from animals to humans — while far less is known about “reverse zoonosis,” the transmission of diseases from humans to animals. However, recent evidence suggesting humans can transmit the flu virus to animals has raised concern among scientists.

The first recorded, probable case of fatal human-to-cat transmission of the pandemic H1N1 flu virus occurred in Oregon in 2009. Since

then, a handful of similar cases have been recorded. But these limited reports have prompted veterinary researchers at Oregon State and Iowa State Universities to identify more cases of this type of disease transmission to better understand the risks posed to people and pets.

As of October 2012, researchers had identified 13 cats and one dog with pandemic H1N1 infection that appeared to have come from humans. The animals’ symptoms were similar to those in humans:

They developed severe respiratory disease, stopped eating, and some of the animals died.

The researchers are surveying flu transmission to household cat and dog populations and suggest people with flu-like illnesses distance themselves from their dogs and cats. If a pet experiences respiratory problems or other illness after exposure to someone with the flu, the scientists recommend taking the pet to a veterinarian for testing and treatment.



HELEN PEPPE PHOTOGRAPHY

Parents should make sure their children wash their hands after playing outside. The parasitic disease toxocariasis can be transmitted to people through contact with an infected dog's feces in yards, gardens and open play areas.

prevent its spread to humans, including wearing gloves when handling your dog, avoiding contact with his bodily fluids and often washing your hands. A vaccination for leptospirosis is available for dogs. In humans, leptospirosis can cause fever, aches, chills, abdominal pain, diarrhea, vomiting and rashes. Severe cases can cause kidney or liver failure.

Rabies

Cause: A bite from an animal infected with the virus, which attacks the nervous systems of animals and people — and can be deadly to both. The disease is 100 percent preventable via vaccination and almost always fatal in unvaccinated pets. In humans, it's possible to prevent rabies infection if a series of shots is given soon after a bite. Once symptoms appear, the person rarely survives the disease.

"Fortunately, rabies isn't as common in the U.S. as it used to be," says Jeanette O'Quin, DVM, MPH-VP, in the Department of Veterinary Preventive Medicine at Ohio State. However, there has been an increase in rabies in raccoons in the Eastern United States in recent years, she says. "That increases the risk in that area for pets and people to contract rabies."

Mites

Cause: Certain parasites, such as Scabies and Cheyletiella, cause a dermatitis in

pets and can be transmitted to people, who can develop an itchy rash. Because the mites typically won't reproduce on humans, symptoms should resolve once the mites are cleared from the pet.

Ringworm

Cause: A fungus triggers this skin disease. Characterized by hair loss and a red, variably itchy rash, ringworm can be transmitted from a dog to a human via contact with an infected animal's skin or hair. One difficulty: It's possible for a pet to carry ringworm spores and not show any symptoms.

Roundworms

Cause: The common intestinal parasites *Toxocara canis* and *Toxascaris leonina*. Roundworms aren't particularly harmful to adult dogs, but a large number of the parasites can be life threatening to puppies and debilitated older dogs. In both puppies and adult dogs with small numbers of worms, there may be no outward signs of infection.

The disease in humans — called toxocariasis — can be transmitted to them through contact with a dog's feces. Children are at an increased risk. In the U.S., toxocariasis is one of the main causes of blindness caused by parasites in children, says Dr. Hoet at Ohio State. "Keeping your pets dewormed on a regular basis

will dramatically reduce exposure at home," he says. "However, other pets can contaminate areas like yards, gardens and open play areas, so parents should prevent kids from getting dirt in their mouths, and make sure that they wash their hands after playing outside."

Hookworms

Cause: Several species of parasites. Puppies are especially likely to have hookworm infections and can pass hookworm eggs in their stools. Eggs or larvae can enter the human body via contact with contaminated stools or dirt, and the infection can be painful, with itchy skin infections or intestinal bleeding and inflammation. As with roundworm, transmission can be prevented by avoiding contact with potentially infected feces or dirt, and through regular deworming of pets.

Salmonellosis

Cause: The bacteria *Salmonella*. Although most commonly transmitted through contaminated food, Salmonellosis is also a zoonotic pathogen that can be spread from animals to people and from people to animals via contaminated feces. It lives in the intestinal tract of many animals. *Salmonella* germs are shed in animals' feces and can contaminate their environments. People can also get a *Salmonella* infection if they don't wash their hands after contact with infected animals or their environment. Most people who contract Salmonellosis have diarrhea, fever and stomach pain lasting about a week. However, infections can become more severe and require hospitalization.

"The diseases mentioned here and in the sidebar have existed in dogs for years, and yet their actual zoonotic potential is small," Dr. Miller says. "Why? Good personal hygiene and common sense. If your dog is ill, take him to his veterinarian so the cause of the disease can be found and corrected. And the importance of hand washing with plain old soap and water can't be stressed enough." ♦



Katherine A. Houpt, VMD, Ph.D., diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists and emeritus professor at the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, provided the answer on this page.

Please Share Your Questions

We welcome questions of general interest on health, medicine and behavior. We regret however, that we cannot comment on specific products and prior diagnoses. Please send correspondence to:

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COMING UP ...

CONGESTIVE
HEART FAILURE



HOW DOGS SEE



REVERSE
SNEEZING



CHANGES IN
COAT COLOR



The Poodle With a Penchant For Chasing Cars — and Women

Q I have owned three Standard Poodles, but my current one is drastically different in temperament and behavior, almost to the point of my suspecting I am dealing with a different species. My previous dogs followed me like ducklings and were sociable with other dogs and humans.

I learned early on I could not walk Sextimus off-lead. When a car comes by, he rears up and barks and pulls on the leash. He likes to swim in the small lake on campus, where I work. However, within 30 seconds of my letting him loose in the lake, he runs toward the major thoroughfare where he can chase cars. He menaces people whether they are running, jogging or walking, going after women students more than men.

It would be nice if canine researchers could find the gene that instigates intractable car chasing. Until then, can you please help?

A Finding a gene for car chasing is a tall order. So far only one gene for a specific canine behavior has been found — the gene for flank sucking — identified by Dr. Nicholas Dodman and his colleagues at Tufts. Car chasing is not an abnormal behavior like flank sucking. It is an all too normal behavior. It is probably predatory behavior. Wolves chase deer, kill and eat them. Not too many Poodles survive on a diet of the Toyotas they catch, but the behavior still persists. Most dogs I see for this problem chase joggers and bicyclists and — it is sad to recount — may bite when they catch their “prey.”

Even in the short term of my professional lifetime, the number of car chasing dogs has decreased. This may be because owners are more responsible and do not let their dogs run free or because there actually has been evolutionary pressure. The dogs who chased cars were hit by cars and did not live to pass on the car-chasing gene.

Predatory behavior consists of several phases. The first is perceiving the prey. Canine vision is not as acute as ours. Nevertheless they are adept at motion detection so the moving car is an excellent stimulus.

The next phase is the chase. That is what Sextimus is doing. Unfortunately, he seems to have gone onto catching, especially lady pedestrians.

There is some evidence that the appetite phase (chasing) is almost as rewarding to dogs as the consummatory (eating the prey) stage. Sextimus does not stop performing the behavior even though he receives no meat or even a Milkbone for chasing because chasing itself is rewarding.

Now let us look at Poodles. Although we tend to think of them as fashion statements, they were bred for a utilitarian purpose — to retrieve water fowl. They are actually called caniche (chien canard) “duck dogs” in French. That is exactly what your dog was bred to do and loves to do. Unfortunately, he seems to have separated splashing in the water from chasing so instead of chasing ducks or balls he chases cars and people.

What can we do to improve his behavior? There are probably many genes involved in chasing behavior, but even if we knew a key gene in the sequence, we are not at the stage where we can turn genes on and off except in the laboratory. What we could do is cheek swabs or hair samples from several hundred dogs of the same breed divided into car chasers and non-car chasers. We could then do a genome-wide scan and see which genes differed between the two populations. That sounds like a great Ph.D. project.

To improve Sextimus’ behavior: Obtain a Gentle Leader or similar head halter so you can control his head. It is much easier to stop a dog and regain his attention by pulling his head to face you than when he is focused on a car, another dog or a pedestrian. I am afraid he should never be off leash unless you are within a fenced enclosure. He is menacing people and he might be hit by a car. ♦



His owner asks: Is there a gene that causes car-chasing?

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