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SMALL ANIMAL CLINIC 530-752-1393
DERMATOLOGY SERVICE

Information for Clients

Solar Dermatitis

Introduction

Solar Dermatitis occurs from a sun induced reaction on white, light colored or previously damaged skin. The affected areas are usually hairless or thinly haired. The condition can occur from exposure to direct or reflected sunlight. Dog breeds predisposed to Solar Dermatitis include Staffordshire terriers, Bull terriers, Beagles, Dalmatians, German Shorthair Pointers, Boxers, Whippets, Greyhounds, Italian Greyhounds and Great Danes. This condition is also observed in other purebred and mixed breed dogs that have thinly coated areas of short, white hair. In the dog, areas most frequently affected include the top of the muzzle, abdomen groin and flanks. In cats, the areas affected are almost exclusively on the head. The ear tips, around the eyes, or muzzle may all be affected. Affected animals have a history of living predominantly outdoors, and some of even “sunbathing”. The danger of Solar Dermatitis is that the condition is cumulative and progressive. Left unchecked, Solar Dermatitis will progress to Actinic Keratosis (a precancerous condition), and onward to true skin cancer. Cancers linked with Solar Dermatitis include Squamous Cell Carcinoma, Hemangioma, and cutaneous Hemangiosarcoma.

Clinical Signs

Early lesions of solar dermatitis may be hard to detect. Initially, the areas may be reddened and scaly. With repeated solar exposure the skin may appear thickened, bumpy and crusty with severe redness. Secondary bacterial skin infection is common, and may complicate the presentation.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis of Solar Dermatitis is made via history, clinical signs and response to therapy. If there is suspicion that the condition has progressed to Actinic Keratosis or skin cancer, then a skin biopsy is strongly advised for accurate diagnosis. If one of the skin cancers is diagnosed, then additional testing may be required to rule out metastasis.

Treatment and Prognosis

The primary required therapy involves keeping your pet out of the sun, and photoprotection when outside. Some dogs will tolerate wearing a T-shirt as partial protection. Sunscreens work best on areas where they can't be licked off – usually the face and head. Localized areas of sensitivity or previous damage (i.e. white ear tips) are ideal for sunscreen use. Pediatric, waterproof sunscreens @ a minimum 15 SPF are recommended. The sun's rays are strongest between 9:00am and 3:00pm. Sensitive pets should be kept inside during these hours. There are oral treatments available for conditions that have not progressed to the cancerous stage. Once skin cancer has been diagnosed, then surgical intervention is necessary in addition to oral medications.

Solar dermatitis in the early stages is reversible with strict, lifelong sun avoidance. Once actinic keratosis is diagnosed, then lifelong monitoring of lesions for progression to skin cancer and probable oral medications will be required. The best treatment is one of prevention: Keep your thinly coated, white or light skinned animal friends inside and out of the sun!