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Information for Clients

## PERIANAL FISTULAS

### Introduction

Canine perianal fistulas are a well recognized but poorly understood disease process affecting the tissues of and around the anus. Fistulas (or deep open clefts or furrows) develop spontaneously in single or multiple sites around the anus. These lesions are painful and may first present with the patient having difficulty defecating or thin ribbon-like stool. German Shepherd Dogs are the predisposed breed to develop perianal fistulas, but this disorder also occurs in other medium to large breed dogs. Research has shown perianal fistulas to be immune mediated but the exact cause is unknown. This disease is often progressive and life long, but can usually be well managed with medical therapy.

### Clinical Signs and Diagnosis

Dogs with perianal fistulas may initially appear to have difficulty defecating, "constipation," thin soft stool or a mucoid discharge noted on and around the anus. Often the patient seems uncomfortable in that area and is seen licking the anal area more than is typical. Upon closer examination one or more ulcers and clefting lesions (fistulas) are noted on or around the anus. In severe cases, the fistulas may extend deeply and involve the anal sacs and anal sinuses. Diagnosis is usually based on the typical presentation though in some cases skin biopsy may be recommended for a definitive diagnosis.

### Treatment

The treatments of choice for this disorder are immunosuppressive drugs such as cyclosporine (Atopica®) or tacrolimus (ProTopic®). Both of these medications act similarly to modulate the immune systems inappropriate behavior, and allow the fistulas to heal. Cyclosporine is an oral medication usually given once daily. This medication, although expensive, has been shown to be very effective at the appropriate dose. A possible second medication may be added to potentiate the cyclosporine and allow a lower, less expensive dose to be given. Possible side effects include GI upset (vomiting and/or diarrhea), excessive hair growth or gum enlargement. Less common side effects include opportunistic infections which may be serious. Monitoring routine labwork is recommended. Tacrolimus is a topical ointment which is commonly applied one to two times daily directly to the affected area. Gloves should be worn when applying this medication. Side effects are uncommon, and the ointment is more

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affordable than the oral treatment. Difficulties with tacrolimus are due to the necessity of applying the ointment daily to a painful and unpleasant part of the body!

Once full resolution of the lesions occur, the dose of either medication is decreased to the lowest possible dose that will control the disease. There is also strong evidence that male dogs respond better once neutered. In difficult to control cases other medications and treatments may be added. Life long medication is likely.

## **Prognosis**

Though challenging to manage, perianal fistulas can most often be controlled and a good quality of life achieved for your dog. The ability to afford and administer long term medication is necessary. Regular check-ups with your veterinarian, monitoring labwork and adjusting treatment protocols will be part of your dog's life. But with consistent treatment, your dog should have a happy and comfortable life.

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