

Alan writes in about his three-year old Labrador retriever named Scout who has been having trouble jumping up into his seat in Alan's truck and, at times, trouble getting up after lying down for awhile. Alan has heard about big dogs having problems with their hips and wants to know if Scout might have such a problem.

Certainly pain associated with the hip joints can cause the symptoms Scout is displaying. The hip joints are a ball and socket type of joint with the head of the upper rear leg bone, the femur, being rounded like a ball fitting into a concave round joint surface in the hip bone called the ileum. The entire joint is surrounded by a capsule. The articular surfaces, the areas within the joint where bone surfaces would come together, are lined by special very smooth tissue called cartilage. There is a somewhat thick clear fluid within the joint that serves as a lubricant helping the joint to flex and extend smoothly and prevent cartilage and bone damage as the surfaces work against each other. This fluid is loosely analogous to the oil inside a car engine, there to prevent the metal surfaces from grinding against each other in motion.

Large breed dogs do indeed tend to have more problems associated with their hip joints. One of the more common diseases we recognize in these patients is hip dysplasia. There are a lot of misconceptions about this disease so I'd like to explain it a bit. The term itself, hip dysplasia, does not represent hip pain or lameness in the hips. It ostensibly means that the ball of the femur does not fit properly into the socket of the ileum. This inappropriate fit, over time, leads to wear in the joint which causes arthritis that leads to secondary joint disease. I'd also like to explain these terms.

Arthritis means inflammation of a joint, in this case referring to the hip joint. This inflammation is painful and is, early on in the progression of hip dysplasia, the cause of the symptoms. These include difficulty getting up and sometimes lying down, difficulty jumping up and eventually difficulty walking. As the arthritis persists, the bone within the joint begins to respond. In the case of bone, it basically has two responses to any insult. It will either produce more bone or take away bone. In the case of chronic arthritis from hip dysplasia, it usually produces more bone. This bone production is often little spikes of bone in and around the joint and is extremely painful as you might imagine. It is this process that is termed secondary joint disease. In summary, the whole process starts as hip dysplasia leading to arthritis, which over time leads to secondary joint disease.

Hip dysplasia is generally considered to be a congenital disease. This means there is a genetic component to the process of hip development that leads to dysplasia. It is a much more common problem with large breed dogs as mentioned earlier, with certain large breeds being more prone to the problem. German shepherds are most often considered to show the highest breed incidence for hip dysplasia but, again, it can occur in any dog.

Arthritis in the hip joints can develop without dysplasia. This normally occurs in older companions especially those that have been highly active throughout their lives. Again larger dogs are more prone owing to a larger amount of weight on the hip joints during exercise. Correspondingly, obesity can greatly increase the incidence of arthritis not only in the hip joints, but also in every joint in companion's body.

Having focused on the hips as the likely source of Scout's problems, I will tell you there are other possible causes including arthritis in his spinal column that may be producing his symptoms. Have him seen by your veterinarian to determine his exact problem. Usually with a thorough evaluation and with the use of radiology, we can determine a definitive diagnosis. There are multiple treatment options depending on that diagnosis. Those will be discussed in upcoming articles.