

Let's talk about thyroid.

Cats tend to produce too much thyroid hormone (hyperthyroidism). Dogs tend to produce too little (hypothyroidism).

As hormone imbalances go, on the surface it's easy to treat - a cheap pill twice a day. There are problems with it, though.

One problem is diagnosis. Before that, even realizing there's a problem is a problem. Symptoms of hypothyroidism are:

- weight gain without an increase in appetite
- lethargy and lack of desire to exercise
- cold intolerance (gets cold easily)
- dry, dull hair with excessive shedding
- very thin to nearly bald hair coat
- increased dark pigmentation in the skin
- increased susceptibility and occurrence of skin and ear infections
- failure to re-grow hair after clipping or shaving
- high blood cholesterol
- slow heart rate
- thickening of the facial skin so they have a 'tragic facial expression'
- abnormal function of nerves causing non-painful lameness, dragging of feet, lack of coordination, and a head tilt
- loss of libido and infertility in intact males
- lack of heat periods, infertility, and abortion (miscarriage) in females
- fat deposits in the corneas of the eyes
- keratoconjunctivitis sicca (KCS) or dry eye due to lack of proper tear production

As you can see, there's nothing specific there. It's winter, my dog is in full coat, he's shedding. Is it excessive? He's gained 5 pounds. He eats normally. Is that because he's exercising less in the winter? Or I'm training more? Failure to regrow hair after clipping? Thank goodness, eh!

Hypothyroidism has been called "the great imitator" because it has so many possible symptoms. That's because it's a SYSTEMIC problem - thyroid hormone affects so many different systems in the dog that it could show up anywhere.

The local vet college prof once told me that they used to insist that dogs have ALL the listed symptoms before they'd even test, and now they're hard-pressed not to consider thyroid in every case of dandruff that comes in.

Add to the problem, there's a "thyroid baldness pattern" for normal-sized dogs, and another for giant breeds. "Normal" thyroid baldness (but could be just thinning hair, or could be just dry hair, or just brittle hair) is on the sides of the body and "friction" areas. "Giant" thyroid baldness is on the outside of the legs. I've been told several times that my Giants can't have a thyroid problem there's no hairloss on the outside of the legs. Ahem. This is NOT a "giant" breed, in spite of the name. It's a "normal" breed.

And, being a systemic problem, hypothyroidism can show up in so many ways BUT in Giants, it has a rather distinct, and abnormal, pattern.

Weight gain and lethargy, right? Nyuh uh. Show me an 18-month-old skinny, spooky Giant Schnauzer with white halfmoons showing under his eyes, and I'll guarantee he has hypothyroidism. "But skinny and spooking aren't listed symptoms..."Remember SYSTEMIC. It's important. "And what's with the white halfmoons?" Giant Schnauzers have white skin. When the hair starts thinning on the bony part under the eyes, the skin starts to show through. Seriously - skinny, spooky, 18 months old, white halfmoons.

Where do thyroid problems come from? There is a gene that causes the body to active destroy the thyroid gland. This is Hashimoto's Disease. Fortunately, there's a test for that, and quality breeders will test for it to be sure they're not producing it. There is, however, "idiopathic thyroid gland atrophy", which basically means yeah, it happens. Don't know why. I live in Saskatchewan, which happens to be the hypothyroid capital of the world in humans. Don't know why, just is. That means that my big ol' Giant, who has been tested clear of Hashimoto's, could very well spend the latter half of his life on thyroid pills with no blame to anybody.

I have my dogs tested at least every couple of years to check their thyroid levels. I do NOT treat "subclinical" hypothyroidism - that is, just because a test says they're a bit low doesn't mean I'm going to start giving them pills. I go by feel, by observation - and with all those possible symptoms, you can see that it's a subtle feeling that starts growing. She's awfully crabby

lately, or gosh, she seems to be sleeping more than she used to, or has husband been feeding her treats on the sly? She's looking kind of tubby lately... or BAM! That skinny, spooky dog has white half moons!

THEN I test, and if the blood test agrees with my observations, I start supplementing. But I keep watching, because "perfect" on the blood test doesn't necessarily mean "perfect" in fact. My Portuguese Water Dog has low thyroid, which I supplement and try to get as close to normal as possible, but she still has a very poor coat and stinky skin - and this isn't normal for her breed or for her line. If I give her a little extra thyroid hormone trying to get the skin levelled out, she starts getting grumpy with the other dogs. Tough to balance her.

When one of my dogs has been diagnosed with hypothyroidism, I have her tested once a year just to have the test confirm what I'm seeing myself.

The bottom line, then, is don't get hysterical, but keep the idea tucked away in the back of your head. I've sent a LOT of dogs from seminars to their vets for testing based on nothing more than "he doesn't learn as fast as the others" or "he learns and then he forgets". In those dogs I've suggested testing, 80% had a deficiency. If I cost you an unnecessary blood test, my apologies, but if you're seeing changes in your dog's attitude and condition, it's worth thinking about.