



Malabsorption information sheet T N Carr

Introduction

Malabsorption may be suspected if an animal is eating sufficient amounts of food but losing weight or is chronically underweight.

What symptoms may I see?

- Diarrhoea
- Weight loss
- Excessive appetite
- Eating unusual things including rubbish and even their own faeces.
- Usually very bright in self
- Sometimes greasy, smelly stools of high volume

Is malabsorption always caused by one disease?

No! The term malabsorption is more a description rather than a disease name. Common conditions causing malabsorption include:

- Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (common)
- Inflammatory bowel disease (common)
- Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (common in GSD's)
- Bowel cancers (rare)

These groups are also subdivided but we shall talk about the common ones we see and how we treat them.

Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency EPI

This severely debilitating disease strikes usually young dogs and has all the symptoms of malabsorption(see above) and often , probably due to the lack of absorption of nutrients, the dogs can have a poor scurfy coat.

The faeces are especially large volume,foul smelling and greasy looking.

What tests may be suggested?

If the vet is suspicious of EPI then he/she will probably recommend blood tests,firstly to rule out other conditions and to check the general health.

Specifically a TLI test will be ordered .This is the most important test to diagnose EPI.

Alongside the EPI test ,the vet will generally order B12,and folate tests.These tests ,run off the same blood samples help the vet decide where the bowel is not working properly.

OK so it looks like EPI.Can we treat it?

EPI can be treated but treatment commitment is life long and in addition to drugs and supplements the diet must be addressed.

The mainstay treatments include:

- Pancreatic extracts eg lypex/pancrex
- Antiibiotics usually oxytetracycline for six weeks.
- B12 by injection may be suggested once weekly
- 150% maintenance calorie intake.For a 25kg dog this may be as much as 2400kcal per day.
- Good quality diets ,regular meals.

Failure of treatment may suggest further disease processes are involved ,including *inflammatory bowel disease*,and bacterial overgrowth.Often more than the recommended amount of pancreatic extracts are needed.Remember if using capsule formulations of pancreatic extracts they must be OPENED and the contents sprinkled on the food.

The outlook with EPI is good but the treatment is usually lifelong.The supplements are expensive,and the commitment to good diets too can be expensive.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease IBD

It is beyond this article to explain all types of inflammatory bowel disease and their causes,so we shall talk about them generally and the types of tests and treatments that may be suggested.

Symptoms of IBD include vomiting and diarrhoea ,excessive bubbly gut sounds ,inappetance, and sometimes malabsorption.

What can we do?

Initially it is wise to make sure the patient is well wormed.

A sensible highly digestible diet is recommended with regular feeding times. Treats must be avoided.

If these measures fail to give an improvement then further tests can be indicated.

What further tests may be done?

- Faecal culture(especially if diarrhoea is a feature)
- Blood biochemistry and haematology(testing for general health)
- TLI/B12/folate(testing for malabsorption and EPI)
- C Lipase (testing for pancreatitis)
- Ultrasound
- Endoscopy most likely with endoscopic biopsies
- Full thickness bowel biopsies.

Luckily not all these tests are needed in all cases,and our policy is always to do the least invasive tests needed to achieve a diagnosis.

What is the likely management?

Dietary management is often the first step.

Drugs used to reduce inflammation in the bowel include:

- Steroids (prednisilone)
- H2 antagonists(eg tagamet)
- Steroid sparing drugs(azothioprine)
- Gastroprotectants

Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth

Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO) is most likely associated with chronic diarrhea.

Malabsorption and weight loss will usually be present as the small intestine is the part of the bowel where most nutrients and energy are absorbed from the gut.

SIBO may be commoner in certain breeds, notably German Shepherds, but any breed can be affected.

It may be mimicked or be associated with other gut disease, for instance inflammatory bowel disease.

A blood test to look at B12/folate can give the vet an idea if SIBO is suspected.

Treatment is usually successful with dietary management.