

Pseudocyesis

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BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Pseudocyesis occurs when an intact (unspayed) and nonpregnant female dog goes through a phase of mammary (breast) development, lactation (production of milk), and behavior similar to that of pregnant bitches. The affected bitch often allows nursing and displays mothering tendencies. This condition is sometimes referred to as a *false pregnancy* or a *false whelping*. Pseudocyesis occurs during the later stages (diestrus) of a heat cycle.

Causes

All bitches produce the hormone, progesterone, for 2 months after ovulation, which results in mammary development. When progesterone decreases abruptly near the end of the diestrus phase of the heat cycle, it stimulates release of another hormone (prolactin) that causes mothering behavior and lactation.

Pseudocyesis can also arise from withdrawal of progesterone therapy in an intact bitch or following an ovariectomy (spay surgery) during the later phases of the heat cycle.

Clinical Signs

Mammary gland distention and the presence of a light-colored fluid or milk at the nipples are commonly seen. Common behavioral changes include mothering of inanimate objects in the household, nesting, and periods of aggression. Hair loss is sometimes seen but is uncommon. Inflammation of the mammary glands may also occur, because the breast tissue is enlarged and engorged. Glands with mastitis are often swollen, painful, and warm.

Diagnostic Tests

Diagnosis is often based on the presence of the clinical signs in a dog that was in heat approximately 2 months previously. If there is any chance the bitch was bred when it was last in heat, an abdominal ultrasound may be recommended to rule out a pregnancy.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

Most signs of pseudocyesis usually disappear spontaneously within 2-3 weeks. Mammary glands should not be massaged or milked out, which would result in even more mammary engorgement. Gently wrapping the mammary glands to apply direct pressure may decrease the release of prolactin hormone, with subsequent decrease in milk production. The wrap also provides some protection to the glands from trauma.

A drug called *megestrol acetate* can be tried for this condition, but clinical signs often return once the treatment is stopped. This drug may also cause changes in temperament and an increase in appetite. If the bitch has sugar diabetes, mammary tumors, or an infection of the uterus, this drug should not be used. For all these reasons, the drug is not often recommended for pseudocyesis.

Testosterone, which is a male hormone, can be given to decrease milk production. Some drugs (bromocriptine, cabergoline) that inhibit the release of prolactin (the hormone responsible for milk production) can also be tried. The most common side effect of these drugs is vomiting.

Spaying the dog does little for the current episode of pseudocyesis but prevents a recurrence in the future.

In aggressive animals, short-term use of a tranquilizer can be helpful. However, some commonly used sedatives can stimulate milk production and may worsen the clinical signs.

Follow-up Care

Continued monitoring and recheck examinations may be recommended over a 2- to 4-week period.

Prognosis

The age at which pseudocyesis occurs is variable, and it does not always occur with every heat cycle. The development of this condition may be an indicator of normal function of the ovaries and does not usually indicate a uterine disease. There is some evidence that repeated episodes of pseudocyesis may be associated with an increased incidence of malignant mammary tumors in the dog's later years.