

DEALING WITH DEGENERATIVE MYELOPATHY IN BOXERS

by Tracy L. Hendrickson / Sunchase Boxers

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We cherish every day with our Boxers. Each day you get to spend with your Boxer after he reaches 10 years of age is more of a blessing. We, as their life long caregivers, need to uphold their health, well-being and comfort. Degenerative Myelopathy (DM) is a slow, progressive, wasting disease of the hindquarters, most often seen in German Shepherds but affecting Boxers as well. Too often these dogs are put to sleep even though their minds and front ends are healthy.

DM is similar to multiple sclerosis in people. It affects the central nervous system (CNS), which consists of the brain and spinal cord. The CNS is responsible for carrying nerve impulses or messages to and from the muscles. Axons carry these messages and are similar to electrical wires. As with electrical wires, axons require insulation. Without insulation, the message leaks out. In the progression of DM, the myelin sheath (insulation) on the axon is damaged or slowly destroyed, rendering the muscle incapable of carrying out a movement.

Many of the following exercises were originally used with MS patients and have been adapted for use with dogs.

If your Boxer has been diagnosed with DM, you can immediately start with a series of exercises to keep or build muscle tone and perhaps slow the disease process.

DM can be divided into 4 progressive stages:

1. Toe dragging or knuckling over.
2. Crossing of the back legs and mild loss of side-to-side hip control.
3. Moderate to severe loss of side-to-side hip control to the point of no control.
4. Total hind end paralysis.

To date there is no cure for DM, however, there are several additional measures you can take that will help slow its progression, therefore maintaining your dog's quality of life.

Keep your dog at his appropriate weight. Extra weight will make his symptoms worse and add more



Stepping exercise

stress to his joints. Aerobic workouts will be easier for a dog that is not overweight.

In the beginning stages of the disease, swimming and walking are the two most important exercises. (See [How to Teach Your Boxer to Swim](#) in the September/October issue of The Boxer Ring). Accessibility and conditions permitting, swimming will increase muscle tone and allow movement with little stress on the joints. Daily walks help build strength since gravity is involved.

It is best to exercise your dog every other day, giving him a day of rest for strained muscles to rest and build up strength. Start with 5-10 minutes every other day for 2 weeks. Increase to 30 minutes twice a week plus a long walk of 1 hour once a week. Walking uphill does wonders to build up the hindquarters. Never exercise your dog to the point of fatigue. Keep your dog cool during walks; symptoms often worsen if the dog becomes overheated.



Doggie Booties

If your dog's back toenails begin to wear to the point of bleeding, use "doggie booties" to protect the nails and pads. The booties will also help stabilize his back end and may be worn around the house as well. Give your dog adequate rest. He will want to sleep more, so let him.

Lateral stabilization exercises will help with hip control. Position the dog's rear legs about a hips width apart. Lightly push hips to the left, to the point that the dog resists (see picture). Hold for 2-3 seconds. Repeat 10 times. Repeat the process pushing to the right side. This can be done on a daily basis.

The "stepping exercise" is great for gaining hind end muscle tone. Hold the dog's front legs up and slowly take 5 steps forward and 5 steps backward (see picture). Repeat this 3-5 times on a daily basis.

The "alternate leg weight bearing exercise" helps with balance and hind end control. Pick up the dog's right front leg and the left rear leg and hold for 30 seconds. Switch legs and repeat 5 times on a daily basis.

Encourage your dog to jump up for treats (see picture). You know your dog's limitations. Try to get him to reach to the point that he is just able to grasp the treat. Repeat 10 times daily.

Slowly push your dog into a sit and then bring him back to a stand-



Alternate leg exercise

ing position. This will build his back hip muscles (see picture). Repeat 5 times on a daily basis.

Dogs that are totally paralyzed need therapeutic massages on their back legs. Slight stretching motions will help circulation as well.

USE OF A DOG CART AND HIND END SLINGS

Some owners of DM dogs use a cart when their dog is no longer able to walk without help. Have your dog measured for external aids early in the disease process while he is still able to stand upright. Most dogs start in a standard rear wheel cart that allows them to use a normal stride, and they are used as walkers. As they lose sensation in their feet, start "knuckling" and lose motor function in their legs, they graduate to the use of stirrups. See HandicappedPets.com for cart information. Expect to pay \$325- \$400 for a cart that will fit your Boxer. Finding a used one is great, but make sure it fits your dog's height and length measurements. There is even a chat group devoted to "wheelchair dogs."

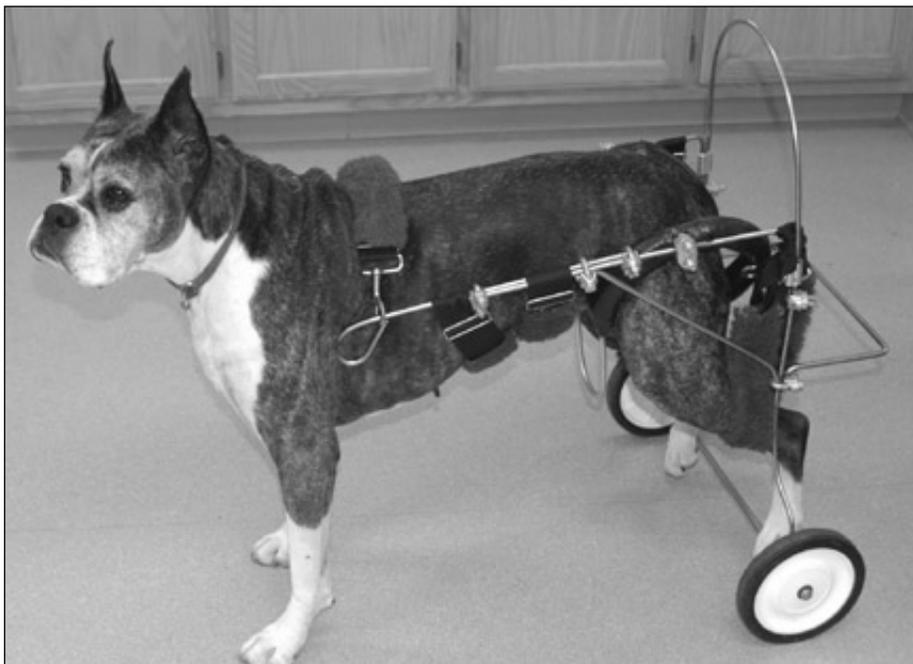
Use the cart for exercise purposes around the house and back yard. Never leave your dog unattended in a cart. Make sure your dog always has a positive experience in his cart. The first few times your dog uses his cart will be stressful, but with



Jumping for treats



Lateral Stabilization Exercise



Krissie is ready to take a spin in her cart



Krissie sports a hind end sling — obviously a "Paris Original" !!!!



Finally...counter top surfing is LEGAL!!!!

help from you, he will acclimate to this new attachment to his body. Encouraging him with his favorite toy or treat will help. A cart may not be the right choice for your dog. It will depend greatly on his attitude towards his disability. Canine hip slings function to "wheelbarrow" your dog's hind end around. The handle of the hip sling helps you distribute your dog's weight evenly onto his front end and also helps prevent you from straining your back. Taking your Boxer for a daily walk may no longer be an option for you. Using a child's wagon (padded with blankets) is great for getting your dog outdoors for fresh air and mental stimulation.

BOWEL AND BLADDER CONTROL

Bladder and bowel control is a problem for many DM dogs. Remember that you are trying to maintain as much quality of life for your dog as possible. Not every dog is a fighter, and you cannot fight this fight for him. For an owner or caregiver, the last stage of this disease (total paralysis) is very time consuming. You may have time for little else. Cleaning up after your dog will

become a large part of your daily routine. HandicappedPets.com has many useful items for the incontinent dog. An excellent article on bowel and bladder control can be obtained at the same web address. Use the "SERVICES/ARTICLES" link to the article.

WHEN TO LET GO

When you feel that your dog has given up and you decide that the time has come to release him to the bridge, do not feel guilty. Many dogs will "ask" to be put down. This is a decision you and your dog will make together. You must honestly ask yourself, "when does his quality of life end?" Euthanasia may be the kindest thing you can do for your dog under the circumstances, knowing you supported and aided your Boxer to live his life fully, in the company of someone who loved him.

"ALL DOGS DO RUN IN HEAVEN."

This article is available in digital format with the hyperlinks to all sites and to pass on to others. Please E-mail your requests to Tracy at Brindoll@cox.net

LINKS AND RESOURCES

Dr. Roger Clemmons, D.V.M., Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Neurology and Neurosurgery

University of Florida. Great 12 page article about DM and diet supplementation.

http://neuro.vetmed.ufl.edu/neuro/DM_Web/DMofGS.htm

Dog Carts: <http://HandicappedPets.com>
<http://EddiesWheels.com>

DM Support E-Group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/degenmyelopathysupport/>

DM Chat Group: <http://www.freewebs.com/dmroster/chat.htm>