



Collapsing Trachea

Collapsing trachea can be a common disease in older small-breed dogs such as Beagles, Chihuahuas, Maltese, Bichons, Terriers, etc. Tracheal collapse is due to degeneration of the cartilage within the tracheal rings. This degeneration causes the tracheal rings to lose their rigidity to the point where they can no longer keep the airway open. Collapse is possible anywhere within the respiratory tract including the cervical trachea (within the neck region), thoracic inlet trachea (where the trachea enters the chest cavity), intra-thoracic trachea (within this chest cavity) or bronchioles (small airway branches off the main airway). To confirm a diagnosis of collapsing trachea and to localize the airway affected, a real-time x-ray (fluoroscopic exam) is required.



Since tracheal collapse is a degenerative process of the cartilage, it generally progresses over time. The severity of signs can range from excessive coughing and can progress to incidences of severe respiratory difficulty with the potential to result in a life-threatening situation. There are a variety of techniques we recommend to manage dogs with severe collapsing trachea.

1.) Environmental Modification. An important way to reduce respiratory problems is to take measures to improve air quality. Smokers are encouraged to never smoke within the house and even change their clothes after smoking, before sitting on the couch (or other close contact situations) with affected dogs. We recommend cleaning furnace filters often and consider using a HEPA air filter in your home.

2.) Medical Management. Coughing will increase the degree of collapse within the airways and can precipitate episodes of respiratory distress. Therefore, antitussive medications are commonly used to reduce the frequency and severity of coughing.

We will sparingly use steroids to reduce any inflammation within the airways. Side effects associated with long-term steroid use can include increased thirst, urination, weight gain, excessive panting, liver enzyme elevations and can predispose to infection. Therefore, we would like to use the lowest effective dose of steroid possible to control signs. We're prescribing prednisone at the dose listed on the bottle, but follow-up appointments will help us determine if we need to make future modifications. Please ensure there is always constant access to water. Although your pet may feel hungrier, they should not be allowed to eat more than normal. In fact, weight control is a very important management tool for treating collapsing trachea. We need to ensure that your pet doesn't gain weight over time as this can place undue stress on the respiratory system.

3.) Ancillary Recommendations. Please use a harness from now on instead of a collar to reduce compression on the trachea and therefore reduce the risk of eliciting a coughing episode. We also recommend that your pet remain in an air-conditioned environment since dogs dissipate heat through breathing and warm environments can force animals to breathe heavier than normal. Animals with collapsing trachea are at risk for developing respiratory distress. Monitor closely for difficulty breathing, blue tinged gum color, excessive panting/coughing or anything else which may be of concern to you. If noted, please seek veterinary medical consultation.

4.) Tracheal Stenting or surgery. When medical management fails, we have the option of placing a flexible stent to will help to keep the airway open, or surgically replacing the tracheal rings. Both have limitations, potential complications, and indications. If you are interested in pursuing either of these options, please schedule a consultation with our surgeon.