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Information for owners re portosystemic shunt surgery

'Liver shunts' are abnormal blood vessels which allow blood returning from the gut to bypass the liver and run directly into the general circulation. Surgery aims to close these vessels and divert flow back through the liver.

Risks:

As with all anaesthetics there's always a small risk of serious adverse consequences (including death) due to general anaesthetic complications. And, as with all surgery, some risk of wound complications such as infection or wound breakdown.

More specifically, with vascular surgery there's a small risk of life-threatening bleeding.

In reality, the main risk with shunt surgery is of post-operative neurological complications. This can happen even a week or two after surgery -causing seizures, confusion, incoordination, coma and death (or signs so severe that euthanasia is necessary). Unfortunately we don't have a failsafe way of preventing this problem. Regardless of how the surgery is done, the risk of neurological complications is about 10% and half of these prove fatal.

https://www.vetpracticesupport.com/tag/postligation-neurological-syndrome/

It's important to be aware that treatment for neurological complications often involves hospitalisation and 24 hour intensive care. This can be very demanding and expensive: often costing more than the original surgery.

It's important to assess this risk in relation to the potential benefits of surgery. Some dogs can live quite happily for many years with a shunt on medical treatment and dietary control without surgery. In others a shunt can affect quality of life in subtle ways. There's a review of this debate here:

https://www.vetpracticesupport.com/portosystemic-shunts-to-operate-or-not-to-operate/

Surgery does not guarantee a complete solution to the problems associated with shunts. Some dogs continue to have problems despite the op. Happily this isn't usually a big problem but it's important to be aware that other shunts can open up or that closure of the original shunt vessel may not be complete. In this kind of situation, long-term medical treatment may be necessary

despite surgery.

If you have any questions about this then please ask to speak to me directly: it’s always important to be completely clear about what we’re getting into before making decisions.

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