

Results of British survey of skin diseases in the Westie

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The following information covering the results of the Atopy in Westies questionnaire that we described in our Fall 2005 newsletter has been furnished by lead researcher Dr. Anke Hendricks of the Royal Veterinary College in England.

Questionnaire Survey of Chronic Itchy Skin & Ear Disease in the WHWT in the U.K.

Earlier in the year 2005, four UK West Highland White Terrier (WHWT) breed clubs (WHWT Club, WHWT Club of England, WHWT Club of Wales, and North of Ireland WHWT Club) kindly supported an owner-questionnaire survey investigating itchy skin and ear disease in this breed conducted by the Dermatology Group of the Royal Veterinary College, London. Although, regrettably, it was outside the scope of the study to provide veterinary advice for individual dogs, we are now in a position to share the results of the study and would like to thank all those who have contributed. A total of 840 questionnaires were posted to members of the breed clubs with their club newsletters. Due to multiple memberships, we estimate that about 680 households received at least one questionnaire.

Background

There is general agreement in the veterinary community that WHWTs are prone to itchy skin disease. A standard dermatology textbook lists the WHWT as predisposed to a number of skin diseases of an itchy nature, early onset, and a tendency for a chronic or recurrent course. One such particularly common skin disease is atopic dermatitis with complicating bacterial and yeast infections. These skin diseases are frequently associated with ear disease. However, the true extent of itchy skin and ear disease in this breed is difficult to assess as the WHWT is a very popular breed and frequency of skin disease is usually not compared to the frequency of this breed in the general dog population. The early onset and chronic/recurrent nature of these skin diseases may necessitate veterinary treatment over many years and lead to impairment of the dog's quality of life. The aim of this study was thus to investigate the extent to which chronic/recurrent pruritic skin disease and chronic/recurrent ear disease is a problem in the UK WHWT population, both in terms of frequency and severity.

Results

A total of 181 questionnaires were received which equated to a response rate of about 24%. One hundred sixty seven questionnaires were included in the analysis. Of these, 118 dogs were female (67 entire, 51 neutered) and 49 male (39 entire, 10 neutered). The mean age was 7 years 7 months (range 18 months to 17 years). One hundred sixty one dogs (96.4%) had been acquired at an age of six months or less while seventy dogs (42%) were bred by their current owners.

Sixty-three dogs (37.7%) were reported to have shown signs of chronic/recurrent itchy skin disease or itchy skin disease plus chronic/recurrent ear disease over the previous 18 months.

Even if a questionnaire had been received for all dogs with itchy skin disease, this figure would have been one out of every ten dogs. An additional six dogs were reported to have chronic/recurrent ear disease only and a further six dogs were reported to have shown skin lesions or hair loss in the absence of excessive scratching, rubbing, nibbling, licking or gnawing.

The dogs affected by chronic/recurrent itchy skin disease or chronic/recurrent itchy skin disease plus chronic/recurrent ear disease were analyzed further and will be referred to as 'affected.' There was a significant difference in the proportion of affected female (31.4%) and male (53.1%) dogs. For 50% of affected dogs, the age at onset of the pruritic skin disease was 18 months or less; for 75% of affected dogs, it was less than 4½ years.

In 44 of the affected dogs (69.8%), the owners had indicated that one or two body areas were affected by excessive scratching, rubbing, nibbling, licking or gnawing, with the feet as the most commonly affected body region in 54% of dogs, followed by ears (15.9%) and back (9.5%). In the remaining dogs, combinations of more than two body regions were affected. Of the affected dogs, 19 (30.2%) had been used for breeding.

Two thirds (63%) of the affected dogs required continuous or intermittent veterinary treatment; this equates to about one quarter (24%) of all affected and unaffected dogs in this survey. For about one third (30.2%) of the affected dogs it was reported that the quality of life had been affected by the skin or ear disease over the previous 18 months; this equates to about one out of ten (11.4%) of all dogs in this survey.

Comment

It is worth noting that this survey is unlikely to be representative for the general WHWT population in the U.K. as breeders, rather than average pet owners, were over-represented in this sample. This is confirmed by the high proportion of homebred dogs, dogs that have been used for breeding, and sexually entire dogs in this sample. Furthermore, it is likely that the response was biased towards owners of dogs suffering from skin or ear disease, as these can be expected to be more motivated to participate. The results of the study may thus overestimate the frequency of chronic/recurrent itchy skin or ear disease. It may be speculated that a large proportion of affected dogs may be suffering from allergic skin disease but the reader should be aware that this survey lumps together a variety of different causes of itchy skin disease and no attempt was made to identify these.

However, these figures highlight that a large proportion of WHWTs appears to develop itchy skin disease, with or without ear disease, at a young age, and most of these require continuous or intermittent veterinary treatment. Despite this, about one third of those dogs, i.e. about one out of ten of all WHWTs if these results are applied to the general population, are affected in such a way that their owner feels the quality of life is impaired.

