

Health Testing of the Great Swiss Mountain Dog

Elbows

By Sue Brailey

When your dog is under sedation for hip x rays it is normal practise to have the elbows done at the same time. As with the hips the vet will fill in forms to be sent off to the BVA scoring. The dog will need its KC registration Certificate and a microchip. The BVA cost of elbow grading is £63 or £114 when done in conjunction with hips. There will be sedation charges on top of this amount which can vary from vet to vet so it is advisable to ring around for costs.

BVA/Kennel Club elbow dysplasia grading scheme

The elbow dysplasia (ED) grading scheme is based on that of the International Elbow Working Group, IEWG, as follows:

- Grade 0 = a radiographically normal elbow.
- Grade 1 = there is no visible primary lesion but secondary new bone (osteoarthritis) up to 2mm in depth is present at any site around the elbow joint.
- Grade 2 = (a) a primary lesion is visible (eg. medial coronoid disease or ununited anconeal process) without visible osteoarthritis OR (b) no primary lesion is visible but osteoarthritis of more than 2mm and up to 5mm in depth is present at any site around the elbow joint.
- Grade 3 = (a) both a primary lesion and any amount of osteoarthritis are visible OR (b) no primary lesion is visible but osteoarthritis over 5mm in depth is present at any site around the elbow joint.

The overall grade is that of the worse of the two elbows.

Breeding advice

It is strongly recommended that breeders wishing to reduce the risk of elbow dysplasia should select their breeding stock (both dogs and bitches) only from animals with an overall grade of 0.

Dogs with elbow grades of 2 or 3 have marked osteoarthritis likely to be due to ED, with or without a visible primary lesion. There is a significant chance of ED being passed on to the offspring.

Dogs with elbow grades of 1 show mild or early osteoarthritis which is also likely to be due to ED. They should only be used for breeding with caution, taking into consideration the ED grades of as many relatives as possible, as well as the results of other health tests and characteristics.

Other European countries use the same scoring system as the BVA for elbows so there should be no confusion.

I heard recently of a 5 year old Swissy who had been diagnosed with an elbow issue. She had a slight limp which worsened after exercise. She had been spayed and was slightly overweight. She was referred to Noel Fitzpatric, who after doing an MRI scan, decided both elbows needed operations on. He felt the lameness could be controlled by pain killers but as the bitch was considered young an operation would be in her best interest. She was operated on where Noel inserted plates and screws into her first elbow. She was sent home after the operation but a week or so later she was in

a lot of pain so was rushed back to Noel. On examination it was revealed that she was rejecting the plate so she underwent another operation to remove the plate. Again she was sent home. A few days later she refused to eat and was in a lot of pain. She was returned to Noel's where she passed away shortly after from heart failure.

The moral of this story is firstly watch your dogs weight especially after spaying or neutering as carrying too much weight can affect their joints. If this bitch had belonged to me I would have put her on a diet and natural painkillers such as MSM, Green Lipped Mussels or Golden Paste (Turmeric) which is a natural anti-inflammatory. I feel the pain caused through the operations was so great her body could not stand it so her heart gave out. This is a very sad outcome for an otherwise very happy, healthy dog who without this operation would still be alive today. The dogs welfare should always be the first concern but mild pain can usually be controlled effectively with natural remedies and does not warrant major surgery.

Another point I would like to make here is always keep an eye on your dogs toenails and do not allow them to get too long. Overgrown toenails can cause the dog to walk incorrectly to compensate which can lead to arthritis of the feet which is very painful and in turn can affect other joints such as elbows as well. Alternatively dogs with mild elbow dysplasia will often have overgrown toenails as they do not walk correctly which can again lead to arthritis of the feet so when the dog is limping and taken to the vet for x rays the elbows will show up as an issue whereas in truth the toenails may be what is causing the most pain.

So to recap, correct weight management and toenail trimming are essential to avoid other issues later in life.