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Wellness in Geriatric Dogs

What is wellness testing?

Wellness testing is the term given to a group of tests that is performed specifically to detect signs of early or subclinical disease in a pet that is apparently healthy.

Why do wellness testing?

"...steps can often be taken to manage or correct the problem before irreversible damage occurs."

Pets cannot tell you how they are feeling, and as a result, disease may be present before you are aware of it. If a disease or condition can be detected before a pet shows signs of illness, steps can often be taken to manage or correct the problem before irreversible damage occurs. Wellness testing is particularly important in the geriatric pet, since there is a greater chance that underlying disease may be present.

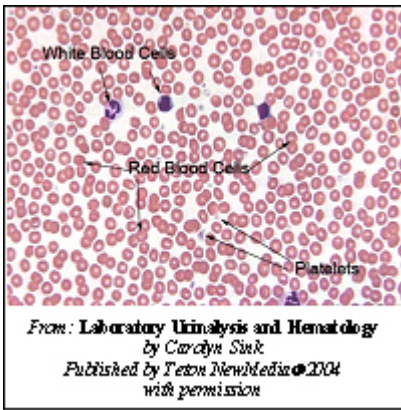


When is wellness testing done?

Wellness testing should be done on a regular basis, and many pet owners combine wellness testing with their annual visit to the veterinarian for their dog's physical examination, vaccination, and heartworm testing. Your veterinarian may recommend more frequent testing depending on your dog's age or specific health concerns. Monitoring your pet's health status on a regular basis makes it easier for the veterinarian to detect minor changes that signal the onset of disease.

What is involved in wellness testing?

There are four main categories of wellness testing for the geriatric dog: complete blood count (CBC), biochemistry profile, urinalysis, and thyroid hormone testing. Within each category, your veterinarian will advise you about how extensive the testing should be. In younger dogs without noticeable health complaints, relatively simple testing may be adequate. However, in the geriatric dog, more comprehensive testing is recommended.



Complete Blood Count –

This simple blood test analyses the cellular components in the bloodstream. These include red blood cells, which carry oxygen to the tissues, white blood cells, which fight infection and respond to inflammation, and platelets, which help the blood to clot. The CBC provides details about the number, size, and shape of the various cells types, and identifies the presence of any abnormal cells. (See handout *Complete Blood Count*).

Biochemistry Profile –

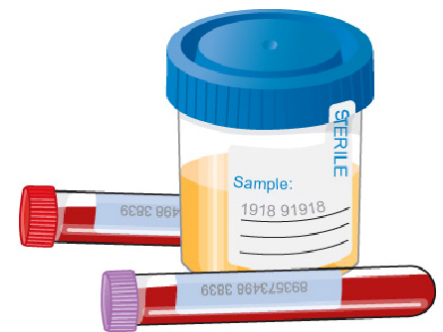
This is a series of tests performed on serum, which is the liquid component of blood. These tests provide information about how well the various organs of the body are working, and help to detect the presence of some metabolic diseases. There are tests to assess the liver and kidneys, tests to identify the presence of diabetes, and so on. (See handout *Serum Biochemistry*).

"In some cases, a more extensive diagnostic workup may be recommended..."

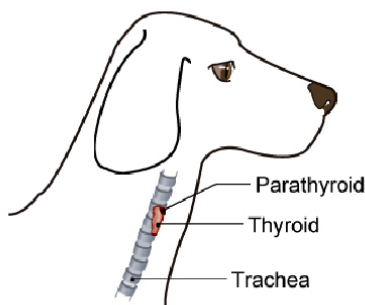
If minor abnormalities are found on the biochemistry profile, the veterinarian may simply request that you repeat the tests at a later time; depending on the abnormality, this may be in a few days, a few weeks, or a few months. In some cases, a more extensive diagnostic workup may be recommended, including an expanded biochemistry profile, or special tests and/or imaging (x-rays, ultrasound).

Urinalysis –

Urine evaluation includes an analysis of the chemical components in the sample, as well as a microscopic examination of the cells and solid material that may be present (see our handout *"Urinalysis"*). Urinalysis provides information about how well the kidneys are working, identifies the presence of inflammation or infection in the kidneys and urinary system, and may detect the presence of underlying metabolic disease such as diabetes. Urinalysis is necessary for a complete assessment of the urinary system. It should be performed routinely as part of wellness testing, and is particularly important in the geriatric



dog because of the increased rate of kidney disease in the older pet.



Thyroid testing –

The thyroid gland is like a "thermostat", which "sets" the metabolic rate of the whole body (See handout *Thyroid Testing*). The most common thyroid disease in the dog is *hypothyroidism*, which occurs when the thyroid gland does not produce enough thyroid hormone. The function of the thyroid gland should be tested routinely in older dogs, especially if there is unexplained weight gain, lack of energy, recurring skin or ear infections, or hair loss on the body and tail,

Summary

Wellness testing is a simple and effective way of monitoring your older dog's health. Early detection and correction of medical problems help to ensure that your pet will be healthy and active for as long as possible.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Kristiina Ruotsalo, DVM, DVSc, Dip ACVP & Margo S. Tant BSc, DVM, DVSc
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