

# Pneumonia *What You Need to Know*

by Kathy Wilson

## Why You Need to Know

Pneumonia in the Irish Wolfhound can become life-threatening so quickly that it is imperative for owners and their veterinarians to recognize this disease and its serious nature. A positive outcome depends upon prompt treatment. Diagnosing pneumonia is not always easy, because wolfhounds are notoriously 'stoic' and may not act particularly ill early in the disease, and because the first symptoms can be somewhat vague and may vary from case to case. Because of these factors, a dog can be very ill indeed before it becomes obvious that something is wrong.

Most cases of pneumonia in dogs are related to some 'predisposing factor.' Typical predisposing factors include other illnesses (kennel cough complex or distemper virus, for example), aspiration into the lungs (most commonly in anesthetized dogs or dogs who may have swallowing or esophagus problems, or laryngeal paralysis), or systemic infection (sepsis). Nonetheless, many wolfhound owners have had the experience of a hound becoming desperately ill with pneumonia without any obvious predisposing factor. A hound can seem perfectly fine and then, within a matter of hours, be seriously ill. Survival can depend upon rapid treatment with antibiotics, so owners and vets must be sensitized to the possibility that a sick hound has pneumonia even if none of the ordinary predisposing factors are present. IWs may very well have an underlying susceptibility which is currently under investigation by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, so tell your veterinarian to keep that fact in mind if he seems unwilling to initiate treatment.

A new strain of the canine influenza virus has spread from greyhound racing kennels in Florida to dog shows in the southeast. Since this is a new strain, no dogs have immunity. Most dogs experience only mild upper respiratory symptoms, but some do get pneumonia, with a death rate between 1% and 5%, so beware.

## Symptoms

If your dog develops pneumonia, the first two things you may notice are lethargy and loss of appetite. Some hounds run fevers, often very high, while others do not. Probably the most universal symptom in the IW is the typical "pneumonia posture" of extended neck and head, which the wolfhound assumes to make breathing easier and take in more air. The neck and head are lowered, level with the back, and the head is held straight out. Usually a wolfhound with pneumonia will not be comfortable lying on its side. Most wolfhounds don't have nasal secretions with pneumonia, although some may. Some may also display rapid or difficult breathing early on. In some cases a hound will appear to have abdominal distress. A dog displaying signs like these needs to see a vet as quickly as possible. Suspected pneumonia in an Irish Wolfhound can never be taken lightly.

## Diagnostic Tests

X-rays may or may not help your vet diagnose pneumonia. Clinical evidence shows that a wolfhound can be gravely ill and in danger even before changes in the lung tissue can be visualized on an X-ray, so a clear chest X-ray does not rule out pneumonia. Auscultation (listening to the lungs) is frequently, but not always, helpful.

The lungs can be cultured using a tracheal wash if the hound is stable enough to undergo light sedation. This procedure is valuable because results can help guide treatment choice, especially if the IW does not respond to initial antibiotic therapy. However, your vet must initiate antibiotic therapy before results are obtained. Fungal infections display a typical pattern on chest x-rays, but secondary bacterial infection is usually present as well. If an IW does not improve, or relapses when antibiotics are discontinued, it is prudent to rule out fungal infection. Depending on your area, blastomycosis and valley fever are two fungal diseases which can be devastating if left untreated.

Dr. Phil Padrid, a specialist in respiratory disease and a regional medical director of VCA Animal Hospitals, also recommends monitoring blood gases (or pulse oximetry, if blood gas monitoring is not available) as a more reliable tool than x-ray films for assessing a dog's condition.

## Infectious Agents and Antibiotics

Wolfhounds with pneumonia may have a number of different types of bacteria in their lungs: streptococci, staphylococci, e. coli, etc, may be seen alone or in combination. Mycoplasma and fungal infections are also possibilities. Dr. Padrid suggests it is not a good idea to discount anaerobic bacteria such as e. coli and klebsiella when choosing antibiotic therapy. He recommends 3 weeks of Baytril and Antirobe be given together to cover a broad range of both aerobic and anaerobic, gram-positive and -negative, pathogens. Dr. Margret Casal, University of Pennsylvania Veterinary School, suggests Zithromax, an antibiotic belonging to the class called macrolides, may be a good first choice for pneumonia, because it is effective against a variety of organisms and can be given in one single dose per day. In addition, Zithromax remains at therapeutic levels in the bloodstream for up to ten days after treatment is discontinued.

There are a number of antibiotics in several different classes (including macrolides, fluoroquinolones, cephalosporins) that are available for use in dogs with pneumonia. Among the drugs which are frequently prescribed, Baytril and Zeniquin (fluoroquinolones), Keflex and Naxcel (first- and second-generation cephalosporins) are a few of the other drugs which have proven successful in some individual cases of IW pneumonia. Whatever your veterinarian selects, if your IW does not begin to improve rapidly, your veterinarian must consider either adding a second drug or switching drugs.

## Additional Therapy

In addition to antibiotic treatment, dogs with pneumonia need to be kept well-hydrated. This may require IV or subcutaneous fluids. Sometimes expectorant medicines (like Mucinex, available over the counter in your drug store) help clear the lungs, but cough suppressants should be avoided. Coupage, or rapidly tapping the chest wall, is excellent for helping your IW clear his lungs. Coupage should be performed three or four times each day.

It is also important for your IW to have light exercise; (especially important if your dog requires hospitalization, so make sure the caregiver knows this!) but remember that lung capacity is diminished. Just make sure your IW is not outside any longer than necessary in rainy or cold weather

You and your vet should carefully monitor your hound's progress. Again, pneumonia in Irish Wolfhounds is a very serious illness. Failing to treat promptly and aggressively can be fatal!