Frequently Asked Questions:
Canine Diabetes Mellitus

Andrew C. Bugbee, DVM, DACVIM
University of Georgia

1. What is diabetes mellitus?
Diabetes mellitus (DM) is caused by a lack of insulin action, which makes your pet unable to utilize glucose for energy.

2. Why did my dog get this disease?
Similar to type 1 DM in humans, canine diabetes is often associated with genetics and autoimmune inflammation of the pancreas. Most dogs do not show signs of illness until their pancreas has completely lost the ability to make insulin.

3. How is DM treated?
Most dogs are treated with 2 daily insulin injections under their skin, using a tiny needle to minimize discomfort. Some dogs also require a change to a low-carbohydrate, low-fat, high-fiber diet to control their glucose levels.

4. How long will my dog need treatment for diabetes?
Almost all diabetic dogs require lifelong insulin therapy.

5. How do I monitor my diabetic dog’s health?
Diabetic patients need regular veterinary monitoring. Your own observations of your dog’s health are combined with blood testing (eg, blood glucose curves, fructosamine levels) to ensure the therapies’ effectiveness. While veterinary visits may be more frequent soon after diagnosis, most diabetic dogs only require visits every 4–6 months once the disease is stable.

6. Does DM predispose my dog to other health problems?
Diabetic patients have reduced immune defenses, which can predispose them to secondary infections (commonly, urinary tract infections). They also have a high occurrence of pancreatic inflammation, which can cause gastrointestinal upset and temporarily disrupt their glucose control. Routine veterinary monitoring helps catch problems early and minimize their impact on diabetic control. Additionally, most diabetic dogs will eventually develop cataracts in both eyes. This is a result of the disease and often cannot be prevented even with good regulation of diabetes.

7. Do I need to change how I care for my dog at home?
Diabetic patients are predisposed to dehydration and should have access to fresh, clean water at all times. Also, the timing of meals and insulin injections should be consistent.

Discuss with your veterinarian or veterinary technician how to monitor your pet for signs of low blood sugar (ie, weakness, tremors or twitching, collapse, seizures). Although high blood sugar is seldom life-threatening, low blood sugar is a medical emergency, so you should seek veterinary assistance immediately if you observe any of these signs.

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references & suggested reading.