

SHOULDER LUXATION:

The trick shoulder could be sudden or brewing over years



Overview—“I don’t understand what Shoulder Luxation is; please help me understand the condition and the treatment.”

The shoulder joint is a unique joint, supported mostly by muscles and ligaments. In the dog and cat, it takes much more stress than in the human because dogs and cats jump and land! (Well, maybe a professional baseball pitcher shoulder can compete with a 5-pound toy poodle shoulder launching off the bed and landing!) The weakest area of the shoulder is the “medial” side (i.e. inside surface, closest to the armpit and chest wall.) In a serious trauma scenario, the shoulder can dislocate in any direction, but the most common chronic-repetitive-stress injuries result in partial dislocation of the medial joint.

There are common breeds of dogs who are predisposed to shoulder dislocation—toy and miniature poodles, shih tzu, lhasa apso, sheltie—but any dog and rarely cats can develop this or be injured in this way with significant trauma. A common history is intermittent crying out, usually when jumping down/landing or when being picked up. Sometimes, owners may feel popping or clunking in the shoulder area too. These signs can mimic those seen with neck pain from slipped discs in the spine. When the shoulder joint is partially or fully dislocated, the dog will be significantly lame, often holding the leg up and walking on three legs. If the shoulder joint pops back in on its own, the dog may only limp a little for a short while...until it happens again.

Treatment ranges from lifestyle modifications to surgical stabilization.

“What options do I have to treat my pet’s condition?”

For some shoulder dislocations resulting from minor trauma, the joint can be corrected manually and supported with a sling/bandage for several weeks followed by physical therapy. If enough of the supporting tissues of the joint remain, this can result in a successful outcome. Looser, more traumatized joints may need surgical correction.

For chronic, repeated shoulder dislocations, surgical correction may be the most helpful course of treatment. If the joint still has relatively normal structures, synthetic replacement ligaments can be woven across the joint to provide support. The post-surgical joint needs extended sling support and proactive physical therapy for the best chance at good function and comfort.

For chronic shoulder dislocations that result from a poorly developed or significantly damaged structures, there are two surgical options that may improve leg function by removing or fusing the shoulder joint. These procedures are not routine or common, but for the right patient may offer improved mobility after a long recover.

An extended duration of using a shoulder brace is typical post-surgically and may also be useful for intermittent preventative support during heavy activity.

“What postoperative complications do I need to know and understand when considering these procedures?”

All shoulder dislocations, treated conservatively and treated surgically, are at risk to dislocate again. Physical therapy and lifestyle modifications can reduce that risk to some extent. Most shoulders having dislocated in the past will have some degree of reduced range of motion; they will be stiff and limited in flexibility.

With the surgical procedures used to stabilize the shoulder, there is an added risk of infection of the synthetic ligaments or bone screws/plates. If infection occurs, additional surgery is needed to remove the implants in an attempt to fully clear the infection with antibiotics.

“Are there situations when the surgical outcome is not what we hoped it would be?”

In small breed dogs, especially if months to years have passed with the abnormality, shoulder function after surgery will not be normal. The reasonable outcome goal is a painfree and functional use of the limb. Professional physical therapy and lifestyle accommodations generally will improve patient outcomes longterm

“How is my pet’s life and lifestyle likely to change after this procedure?”

Lifestyle accommodations include eliminating jumping down activities and minimizing unsupervised use of stairs. Routine use of joint supplements and high dose fish oil may also improve function. Intermittent use of NSAIDs pain medications may be useful for “bad days” after a busy weekend playing or a “tweaked” joint from ploughing through the snow drifts. Other support treatments such as acupuncture, massage, cold laser or joint injections may improve comfort over the long term as well. Intermittent us

“Are there things I can do to prepare myself, my home and/or my pet for this procedure?”

Jumping, stairs and slippery surfaces are all challenges that can cause a stabilized shoulder to be reinjured. Adjusting the home environment to avoid these obstacles completely post-treatment and somewhat permanently lifelong will be helpful. Finding a chest harness that has an easy to grasp handle on the back of your pet will dramatically improve your ability to assist your pet and “catch them” before a dangerous leap from the sofa. (See www.directvetsurg.com for Pet Links and some suggested products.)

Outpatient surgery and anesthesia can be uncomfortable, painful, disorienting, and frustrating experiences for animals; watching your pet work through the early postoperative period and recover from anesthesia and pain medications can be worrisome, scary and frustrating for pet owners. The vast majority of the time this period of difficulty is brief, and *your pet is actually more comfortable and secure at home with you*. Sometimes it doesn’t feel like that at two in the morning when your pet is anxious and not consolable, and you are unsure of what to do. You always have the option of transporting your pet to a 24-hour veterinary facility postoperatively. If you do not want to have your pet home in the first few days postoperatively, please advise your primary care veterinary staff. They will provide contact information for a local 24-hour veterinary facility and help get an estimate for the ongoing care.

It is important that you have proper expectations about this procedure; your experience and you pet’s outcome will benefit greatly. Please discuss this information with your veterinarian when working through the decision-making process regarding **Shoulder Instability**.

Lara Rasmussen, DVM, MS

Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Surgery
DIRECT VETERINARY SURGERY, LLC

(See additional materials at www.directvetsurg.com for pet owners and veterinary professionals.)

