NEW ZEALAND PIG HUNTING ASSOCIATION INC

THE GRUNT!

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ARE YOUR DOGS ON A GO SLOW?

What you need to know

The NZPHA and Massey University are investigating the Go Slow disease which can affect all breeds of dogs but in particular dogs used for pig hunting in NZ.

Back ground

You've just got home from a successful hunt and the dogs are in their kennels, happily chewing on some meat and bones from a wild pig you caught. The next morning you plan to go hunting again, but the dogs are shaking and struggling to stand, and one has vomited. They seem to get worse after you let them out of the kennels and sit down after walking a few steps. By the following day, the shaking has mostly stopped, but the dogs have no energy. Most of them recover over the following few weeks, but still struggle to keep up at the end of a long hunt. Several months later, one dog still can't hunt properly. You try some vitamin supplements recommended by the vet and it seems to help a bit, but he never quite returns to full form.

If you've had dogs with Go Slow, this story will be all too familiar to you. Go Slow is a disease that was first recognised in Northland 20 years ago, but it is now known to occur in various areas throughout the upper North Island. This year, several cases have also been seen in southern Wairarapa, where Go Slow hasn't been a problem in the past. In the South Island, Go Slow is almost unheard of, apart from two cases last year in working dogs on a high country station.

Symptoms of Go Slow develop within 2 hours after a dog has eaten Go Slow pork, but the symptoms may not be noticed until the dogs are hunted next. Meat, offal and bones from wild pigs have all been linked to cases of Go Slow, and signs usually occur more rapidly when dogs eat fresh liver in the middle of a hunt compared to being fed when they're at rest and not exercising. Freezing and cooking wild pork does not remove the risk. In general, meat from wild animals other than pigs doesn't cause Go Slow, although one dog developed symptoms after eating meat from a wild steer. Not every pig caught in a Go Slow area is a Go Slow pig, and individual dogs vary in their susceptibility to Go Slow disease, so some members of a pack that eat Go Slow pork may appear worse affected than others. All breeds of dogs can be affected, from pet Fox Terriers to working Huntaways and everything in between.

Go Slow mainly targets the muscle of dogs and interferes with the way that the muscle produces energy. Normally, small structures within each muscle fibre (known as mitochondria) act as power plants for the muscle, generating energy as needed. In dogs with Go Slow, some of the mitochondria change how they look and stop working as they should. When a muscle lacks energy (especially during exercise), it can't contract and relax properly, and the dog starts trembling and can't walk. Certain enzymes leak out of the injured muscle fibres, and these can be measured on a simple blood test to help diagnose the disease. Go Slow also causes changes in the liver, and specific liver enzymes in the blood are usually higher than normal. It isn't currently known whether species other than dogs can be affected by Go Slow. Pigs linked to cases in dogs often seem to be in good condition and healthy when they are caught, but some have similar muscle and mitochondrial changes to the dogs.

Muscle may recover over time, so the main treatment for Go Slow currently is rest. Most affected dogs need 1-3 months off hunting, and some will still continue to have problems even after long periods with no exercise. Various vitamin supplements have been used to try and support muscle function and energy production, including B vitamins, selenium and vitamin E. A high quality diet, such as Eukanuba or Hill's may also help. In severe cases, dogs with Go Slow may struggle to stand, eat and drink, and may also have diarrhoea; these dogs need to be seen by a vet early on and benefit from being on a drip (intravenous fluids). Vitamin B (Vite B from Ethical Agents, or Megablud sachets from the same company), water, and rest are the mainstays of current treatment as we can offer it.

While we don't yet know the exact cause of Go Slow, it seems that the pigs are eating something poisonous that is passed on to the dogs. Manmade poisons such as 1080, brodifacoum and sodium nitrate have been investigated, but these have not been used in many of the areas where Go Slow occurs. In addition, the changes that occur in the muscle with Go Slow are not typical of any of these poisons, and residues of brodifacoum and 1080 have not been detected in tests on a small number of dogs. There are several species of plants and fungi that may produce toxins that can be passed through the meat, but these are difficult to test for. Liver samples from healthy dogs and Go Slow dogs are currently being analysed and compared to try and find differences in metabolic pathways that may give further clues regarding the cause of Go Slow.

As pig hunters, you can help us put together the rest of the Go Slow puzzle. If you have dogs that you think may have Go Slow, or if you have dealt with it in the past, we're keen to talk to you. Samples of wild pork or other meat linked to Go Slow cases are being collected for future testing, along with samples from any dogs with Go Slow that don't recover. If you think you can help in any way, contact Hayley Hunt at h.hunt@massey.ac.nz or phone 0273410874. Together, we hope to get to the bottom of what's causing Go Slow, so we can stop dogs shaking and enjoy hunting for our wild pork and bacon. ■