

Investigating Saluki health issues

by MaryDee Sist, DVM

Don't ignore the warning signs of ill health. If your Saluki isn't acting right, have him examined by your veterinarian. It is only through establishing a proper diagnosis can effective treatment be initiated. Have lumps and bumps biopsied, so you know what they are and what to do about them. If your Saluki dies, have a post-mortem examination performed so you know the cause of death and any other health issues. By doing this, we will clearly know what health problems we have in our Salukis. By sharing these concerns with other breeders, we can document and then research family health histories. This will assist in breeding healthy dogs in future generations.

The SHR (Saluki Health Research)/SCOA perceived health survey was completed by over 100 Saluki fanciers in 2001. The results showed that there were four major areas of concern: heart conditions, autoimmune disorders, hypothyroidism and cancers. Dogs can be examined and tested for these conditions. The examinations, however, need to be repeated as the dogs age.

Heart conditions

Salukis can be screened for heart conditions. If the Saluki has a heart murmur or a family history of heart conditions, then an examination by a cardiologist is warranted. A complete ultrasound examination, to assess the heart's functioning, performed by a board certified cardiologist familiar with sighthounds, is best. These examinations need to be repeated periodically because some conditions develop as the dog's age.

Autoimmune disorders

A routine Complete Blood Count (CBC) and platelet count can be done periodically. This can indicate cancers of the blood and autoimmune conditions before there are obvious signs of diseases such as leukemia, Autoimmune Hemolytic Anemia (AIHA) or Thrombocytopenia (IMT). There are also blood tests that diagnose tick-borne diseases that can induce some autoimmune conditions.

Hypothyroidism

If there is a family history of hypothyroidism, have your dog's thyroid hormone levels measured in a blood test. Studies have shown that Salukis (like Greyhounds) can have low levels of some hormones, especially T4, when compared to mixed-breed generated reference ranges, and have normal thyroid function. To assess this, it is best to have a full thyroid panel run, including the thyroglobulin autoantibody, which can predict the development of autoimmune thyroiditis years before the onset of clinical signs.

Cancer

Screening Salukis for cancer can be more difficult. External lumps and bumps (like skin and mammary tumors) can be easily biopsied to determine, by microscopic examination, what they are. Tumors in the chest or abdominal area can be suspected from the signs due to the organ involved and diagnosed by seeing the enlargement on a radiograph or ultrasound. Having a tumor doesn't necessarily have to be a death sentence since not all tumors are cancerous. There are various treatment options depending on the type of tumor diagnosed.

SHR's heart pathology study accumulated information on various acquired heart conditions and aging changes found in Salukis. This study also uncovered a high incidence of cancer. The most prevalent form of cancer found was hemangiosarcoma. This tumor was most commonly found in the spleen and the wall of the right atrium of the heart. The presenting sign was usually acute collapse due to blood loss, because the tumor ruptured and the dog bled internally before the tumor was of sufficient size to even see it on an ultrasound examination. If a hemangiosarcoma is diagnosed in the skin or spleen, early surgical removal can be a cure. If the primary site is the heart, however, it cannot be removed and will rapidly spread to the lungs and other organs.

The alarming incidence of cancers has now become a focus of the SHR's research. Only by examining cancer tissue samples can the incidence and significance of various cancers be documented in Salukis. Having these samples banked and available for future DNA analysis will be important in helping researchers investigate the cause, whether due to immune dysfunction, induced by viruses or environmental factors and/or genetic factors. Pedigree analysis of these dogs and their relatives is needed to probe for possible modes of inheritance.

Be open to investigating the conditions and problems that occur in Salukis. And, especially be willing to share your concerns with others to establish a family health history. If your Saluki is ill, have your dog examined to diagnose the condition. If your Saluki dies, have your veterinarian do a post-mortem examination to determine the cause of death. Often sections of organs and tissues need to be examined microscopically to determine various conditions. Veterinarians can send preserved tissue samples for histological examination to various pathology laboratories for a diagnosis. Or, samples from your Saluki can be included in the Saluki pathology study. For information on submitting samples contact me at SalukiHealth@aol.com.

The members of the SCOA Health Committee and SHR have been working on a very detailed health survey to be distributed in 2007. The goal is to identify current Saluki health issues and then set priorities for future health-related research. A collaborator, Dr. Casey Gonda, stresses it is important that, when answering questions indicating the presence or absence of a particular disease or condition, the appropriate testing or veterinary verification of diseases or disorders be substantiated and not assumed. I hope that fanciers will take the time to carefully complete the survey. These projects take incredible amounts of time but will help ensure the future health of our Salukis.