

The upper airway consists of the mouth, nose and throat. Abnormalities of the upper airway can be caused by genetic conditions, nutritional problems or trauma to the area. Conditions affecting the upper airway can be life-threatening, though many may be permanently or temporarily resolved through surgery. Surgical treatments can greatly improve the quality of life of your pet. We'll go over some of the most common diseases affecting the upper airway in pets here.

Laryngeal Paralysis

Laryngeal paralysis affects the larynx, or 'voice box.' This part of the throat opens to allow air in and out during breathing and closes while eating or drinking to prevent anything from getting into the lungs. In laryngeal paralysis, the nerves that control that opening and closing can stop working quite as well, cutting off breathing and allowing food or water into the lungs. This condition can be fatal when left untreated.

Symptoms

Breeds that most commonly experience laryngeal paralysis include Retrievers, Dalmatians, Newfoundlands and Bouvier De Flandres.

Signs of laryngeal paralysis include:

- Noisy breathing
- Unusual panting that's hoarse or raspy
- Changes in or "loss" of bark
- Tiring easily during activities
- Gagging or coughing while eating and drinking

Hot temperatures, excitement, and physical activity worsen these signs due to the pet trying to breathe more deeply. You may notice your pet becoming distressed and perhaps even collapse. Any animal that has collapsed needs to be taken to an emergency clinic immediately.

Diagnosis & Treatment

To diagnose laryngeal paralysis, we will take a look at the larynx under anesthesia to see if the laryngeal cartilages are opening and closing as they should. Treatment for this condition is surgery to open up the airway. The most common surgery to treat laryngeal paralysis is an arytenoid lateralization, or 'tie back' procedure. One side of the larynx is permanently kept open to allow for easier breathing. The first few weeks of recovery will require careful monitoring for behaviors and additional signs, but pets generally learn how to live well post-surgery. The vast majority of pet owners feel that this procedure improved their pet's quality of life.

Tracheal Collapse

The trachea (also known as the 'windpipe') connects the nose and mouth to the lungs. It's made up of semi-rigid cartilage. With tracheal collapse, the cartilages lose their rigidity and causes inflammation and coughing.

Symptoms

Breeds that most commonly experience tracheal collapse include all toy and miniature-breed dogs, such as Poodles, Yorkshire Terriers and Pomeranians.

Signs of tracheal collapse include:

- Coughing when panting or breathing heavily
- Honking cough
- Wheezing breaths
- Hacking or gagging after coughing

Some animals experience anxiety/distress or collapse due to problems getting enough air. Any animal that has collapsed needs to be taken to an emergency clinic immediately.

Risk factors for tracheal collapse include:

- Obesity
- Infection of the respiratory system
- Environmental irritants
- Hot, dry weather
- History of heart disease

Diagnosis & Treatment

To diagnose tracheal collapse, we will take a look at the trachea under anesthesia to see if the area is narrowed. We'll rule out secondary factors using a chest x-ray. For pets with a more mild form of the condition, we may be able to treat with medications only. More severe cases require surgical intervention. We will either implant prostheses outside the trachea to help prop it open or place a stent on the inside to support it. Not all pets are a candidate for this procedure, depending on the progression of the collapse. The procedure is also more effective the earlier in your pet's life it's performed.