Discoid Lupus Erythematosus (DLE) is the most common immune-mediated skin disease that affects dogs.

DLE is a member of the family of diseases of Lupus Erythematosus (LE). However, DLE is the mildest form of LE and typically involves the facial skin only (rarely it can involve the feet & genitalia). Unlike systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) DLE does NOT cause other symptoms of illness (no fever, lethargy, joint pain, etc.). The problem begins when the dog develops antigen/antibody complex deposition and the dermal-epidermal junction of the skin.

What is the cause of DLE?

The exact cause is not known. There does appear to be a genetic predisposition as some breeds seem more commonly affected (Collies & Shelties, Australian shepherds, Huskies are a few examples). Various explanations have been proposed for the cause of DLE and include drug reactions, and viral initiation and UV light exposure. UV light exposure is thought to be the most important and can exacerbate symptoms (even causing seasonal worsening when the sun’s rays are strongest).

At what age does DLE typically develop?

Most often young adult dogs but it can occur in older dogs as well.

What do lesions look like? What are the symptoms of DLE?

DLE typically starts with depigmentation of the nose (planum nasale) and lips. The normal “cobblestone” appearance of the nose is lost and can turn gray-pink in color. The depigmentation then progresses to erosions and ulcerations. Lesions can sometimes involve the skin around the eyes and the ears (pinnae). While these lesions may be uncomfortable, your dog should otherwise feel fine.

Consult a veterinary dermatologist if your dog is not improving!

Symptoms are aggravated by sunlight.

Sun avoidance & topical therapies are mainstay of treatment.
Autoimmune Series:
Discoid Lupus Erythematosus (DLE)

How is DLE diagnosed?

Skin biopsy! A skin biopsy is important because many other diseases can look like DLE. Which lesions are taken for skin biopsy and which pathologist interprets the skin biopsies are very important. Veterinary dermatologists have specialized training to help ensure an accurate diagnosis of this sometimes difficult to diagnose disease. Ideally a pathologist with expertise in skin disease (“dermatopathologist”) should interpret the biopsy.

How is DLE treated?

• The disease is aggravated by sunlight so restricting sun exposure during 10 am – 4 pm when UV rays are strongest is always recommended. Use of sunscreens/blocks can be additionally helpful.
• The goal of treatment is to control the disease and symptoms with the safest medications at lowest possible doses to avoid negative side effects. Depending on severity, more or less aggressive therapies may be recommended by your veterinarian. Oral therapy with a combination of doxycycline & niacinamide; is often used. This therapy can take up to 3 months for a maximum benefit so is typically combined with topical medications (steroids and/or tacrolimus ointment). Vitamin E & fatty acids can also be partially helpful.
• In general, this disease is managed with conservative therapy prior to considering therapy with long-term oral steroids or other chemotherapy drugs (such as cyclosporine, azathioprine).

What is the prognosis?

• Good to excellent in most cases but lifelong treatment is often needed.
• Periodic monitoring will be required to watch for any side effects depending on the type of drug therapy that is being used.
• If you are not seeing improvement within 3-4 weeks of initial diagnosis consider having your pet see a veterinary dermatologist.
• Veterinary dermatologists can be found through www.acvd.org

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