

Canine Hypothyroidism: Understanding Your Dog's Low Thyroid Condition

Hypothyroidism is one of the most common hormone disorders in dogs. It occurs when the thyroid gland doesn't produce enough thyroid hormone, which helps regulate your dog's metabolism — the process that controls energy levels, body temperature, and overall health.

When thyroid hormone levels drop, your dog's body slows down. The good news? Hypothyroidism is **easy to diagnose** and **very manageable** with daily medication.

What Is the Thyroid Gland and What Does It Do?

The **thyroid gland** is a small, butterfly-shaped organ located in your dog's neck. It produces hormones — primarily **thyroxine (T4)** and **triiodothyronine (T3)** — that control how quickly the body uses energy, burns calories, and maintains organ function.

If the thyroid doesn't produce enough hormone, everything in the body “slows down,” leading to noticeable changes in your dog's energy, coat, and weight.

What Causes Hypothyroidism in Dogs?

In most cases, hypothyroidism in dogs is caused by the **immune system attacking the thyroid gland** (a condition called **lymphocytic thyroiditis**) or by **thyroid tissue shrinking over time** (thyroid atrophy).

Both causes result in **reduced thyroid hormone production**.

Less commonly, hypothyroidism may be caused by:

- Certain medications
- Rare pituitary gland disorders
- Cancer affecting the thyroid

It is most often seen in **middle-aged, medium to large breed dogs**, such as:

- Golden Retrievers

- Doberman Pinschers
 - Boxers
 - Cocker Spaniels
 - Labrador Retrievers
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Common Signs of Hypothyroidism

Because the thyroid affects the whole body, signs can be quite varied. Common symptoms include:

- Lethargy or reduced energy
- Weight gain despite no change in diet
- Hair loss, especially on the tail, trunk, or back of the thighs
- Dry, dull coat or flaky skin
- Intolerance to cold
- Slow heart rate
- Thickened facial skin (“tragic” expression)
- Recurrent ear or skin infections

Some dogs may also have behavior changes like increased sleepiness or seeming “sluggish.”

How Is Hypothyroidism Diagnosed?

Diagnosis starts with a **physical exam** and **bloodwork**.

Your veterinarian will often measure:

- **Total T4 (thyroxine)** – the main thyroid hormone

- **Free T4** – the portion of hormone available to the body’s cells
- **TSH (thyroid-stimulating hormone)** – produced by the brain to control thyroid activity

Other lab tests may help rule out diseases that mimic hypothyroidism, such as Cushing’s disease or chronic illness.

Because thyroid levels can be influenced by stress, medications, or other diseases, **your veterinarian will interpret results carefully** in the context of your dog’s symptoms and overall health.

Treatment and Management

Hypothyroidism is **not curable**, but it’s **very manageable** with lifelong medication. Treatment involves giving a **synthetic thyroid hormone** (levothyroxine) by mouth once or twice a day.

After starting treatment, your vet will recheck bloodwork after a few weeks to ensure the dosage is correct. Once stabilized, dogs typically need blood tests every 6–12 months to monitor their hormone levels.

Most dogs show noticeable improvement within **a few weeks** of starting treatment:

- Energy levels increase
 - Coat and skin improve
 - Weight stabilizes
 - Personality returns to normal
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Living With a Dog With Hypothyroidism

With consistent medication and regular monitoring, dogs with hypothyroidism can live **long, happy, and healthy lives**. The key is **daily medication, proper dosage, and periodic checkups** with your veterinary team.

Tips for success:

- Give the medication at the same time each day

- Don't skip doses
- Use the same brand or formulation (switching brands can affect hormone levels)
- Schedule routine checkups and lab work as recommended

Canine hypothyroidism is a common but highly treatable condition. Recognizing the signs early and working closely with your veterinarian can make all the difference. With the right care, your dog can regain their energy, healthy coat, and joyful personality — and go back to living life to the fullest.