

By Todd McGuire, pet owner in Australia

Mia was my first Alaskan malamute, and she was the best pup anyone could ask for. Sadly, her young life was cut short by a form of Polyneuropathy (PN), a horrible disease that I hope no one else ever has to experience.

To give you a better understanding of polyneuropathy in Alaskan malamutes, I encourage you to read an article written by Vicky Maclean a few years ago for the AMCA: <http://www.alaskanmalamute.org/health/polyneur.asp>

In Mia's case I first noticed something was wrong when she was eight months old, and she started to bunny hop while running around at the dog park. Thinking she may have put her back out, we went to our vet for a chiropractic adjustment, but a few days later she was the same again. Thus began three months of vet exams, physiotherapy visits, muscle building exercises, swimming, underwater treadmill, etc. She had good range of motion in her back legs, but was definitely lacking some muscle there and did not like to bend her legs much. Mia would sit funny with her legs stretched straight out to one side, and when walking she flicked them out to the side rather than lift and bend at the knee.

We did x-rays to check her hips. They were fine, so we proceeded with the muscle building exercises and swimming/treadmill in an attempt to build up the muscle again. After two months of this, we saw no improvement, and she was getting stiffer and slower at getting up.

One day at the physiotherapy session, we checked Mia's nerve reflex responses and were a bit surprised at the results. Her back legs had almost no response, especially the femoral nerve; yet her front legs had above average responses. Typically, dogs have good responses in their back legs and poor responses in their front legs, so something wasn't right.

In April, we saw a specialist vet who deals with surgical neurological problems, and it was the first time that we actually got a yelp out of her while a vet was poking and prodding her. He suggested that she could have a bulging disc in her back, which could explain the poor nerve reflex and muscle loss. So Mia went back for more testing; this time another round of x-rays, an MRI, and a spinal fluid sample to check for any environmental causes. All the tests came back negative, so we knew her problem was not environmental or musculo-skeletal.

Five days after getting all her results back, the veterinarian rang to say he had discussed Mia's case with a number of colleagues, and they all agreed that the likely problem was a form of neuropathy. He went on to tell me that the day would come when Mia would no longer be able to get up without help, or stand, or even go to the toilet, and when that day came, I would likely have to put her to sleep.

To say this gutted me was an understatement. Here was my beautiful pup who had helped me

through one of the hardest times in my life, and I was being told she may not have much longer to go. At this point, I was unsure of what to do, so I started searching the Internet for anything and everything I could find on neuropathy in malamutes, and this was when I stumbled across Vicky's article. Reading it was like marking things off a checklist, and I knew then that this was what Mia had. To make things even worse, I emailed my breeder and the other pet people who owned Mia's littermates, and within five minutes of sending my email, the lady who owns Mia's sister, Misty, in Tasmania was ringing me to find out the symptoms - it turns out that Misty is likely affected, too.

Initially, we thought that Misty was worse than Mia, as she was collapsing all the time and struggling to get back up. Mia, on the other hand, was on steroids and was having acupuncture done and I was adding a Chinese herb powder to her food, in an attempt to stimulate her nerves. After the first week, she was showing a slight improvement, but that was short lived. Less than three weeks after learning she had PN, Mia's condition went downhill very quickly, and that day I dreaded was upon me. Depending upon the severity of the PN, some dogs can go into remission later in life, and some can even bounce back from not being able to support their own weight if someone is there to nurse them through it. In Mia's case, her back leg muscles had deteriorated to the point that they were virtually nonexistent, initially from the disease and then from lack of use. Even if Mia had pulled through, she had no muscle left to support herself, and her previously strong front end was losing strength fast.

On May 4, 2010, I had to make the hardest decision of my life, choosing between Mia's well being and my selfishness to keep her with me. On that day, we said our final goodbyes and let her go to a place where she could run and play again like all pups should. She was 11 days shy of her first birthday.

Unfortunately, very little is known about PN, despite recorded cases in malamutes being around since the 1970's. I had an autopsy done on Mia to try and gain a better understanding of this disease, and in the hope that no one else ever has to go through this again. In Mia's case, the autopsy revealed damage to the myelin sheath that protects the nerves, almost no muscle in her rear legs, and muscle deterioration in her front end. Further testing ruled out any environmental or musculo-skeletal causes, leaving inherited/genetic causes as the most likely. While we are able to test for damage of the myelin sheath on dogs while they are alive, this is an invasive procedure and should only be done if a dog is suspected of being affected with PN. At this stage there is no test for breeding dogs to see if they are a carrier of the disease.

On a more positive note, there are currently studies being conducted to try to develop a test for PN. Keep reading for more information.

If you have any questions about PN, please do not hesitate to contact me as I am happy to discuss it. To facilitate discussions, I have created a Facebook group called 'Alaskan Malamutes with Polyneuropathy.' I encourage all of you to become members and help raise awareness of

this serious health issue.

Lastly, I would just like to thank everyone who has helped and supported me through this. It has meant a lot.