Post Surgical Care of Atlanto Axial Instability Repair

Once your pet has had surgery for their atlantoaxial instability, it will usually take 12-24 hours before we know how well things turned out. Unlike human patients, we can not ask our patients to “wiggle your toes” or “can you feel this” so post-operative neurological status can be difficult to determine until they are completely awake. High levels of pain medication also make your pet very groggy and they simply will not attempt to stand or walk until the medication wears off. If your pet had some neurologic damage pre-operatively, it can take several weeks or even months before they return to normal function. Often, even with the most delicate technique, anesthesia and surgical manipulation of the spine will worsen your pet’s neurologic status, but most of the time this is temporary and they will return to their pre-operative status within a few days.

The following instructions will be your guide to home care.

**Weeks 1-3**
Provide pain management with NSAID’s the first five days and antibiotics for the first week. Wear a cervical brace or splint to prevent your pet from turning their neck from side to side or flexing it downward. Put the food and water dish on a brick or large book to put it at your pet’s nose height so they can comfortably eat and drink without bending down at the neck. Confine your pet to a small bathroom or crate or gated area with just enough room to move around comfortably. No running, jumping, playing or outside activity is allowed. Carry your pet outside two or three times daily to urinate or defecate. Decrease your pet’s caloric intake by cutting down the amount of food your normally feed by about one third since they will be burning up less calories than normal. Be sure to support both the front and rear of your pet when you pick them up. Be very careful doing this if they are still in pain as they will even bite their owner under these circumstances. Your veterinarian can show you how to humanely muzzle your pet if this is a problem so no one gets hurt. Failure to strictly confine your pet after surgery can cause the implants to fail and worsen your pet’s injury.

Recheck with your doctor one week after surgery, sooner if you notice any swelling or redness around the incision or pet stops eating or drinking or suddenly worsens neurologically.

Sutures should be removed two weeks after surgery.

**Week 4**
Begin slow leash walks of less than 10 minutes three times a day with no further activities. You can allow your pet to have access to a larger area but no stairs are allowed.
and no jumping up onto couches or beds. A progress radiograph should be taken at this time to evaluate the implants and the fusion of the spine. If the fusion is progressing and the implants are not loose, the cervical splint or brace may be taken off at this time.

**Weeks 5-6**
Increase the slow leash walks to 20 to 30 minutes two or three times daily but nothing else. Allow your pet more room to move around, perhaps gating them in a family room or small bedroom.

**Weeks 7-8**
Schedule another recheck with your doctor eight weeks after surgery to evaluate your pet’s progress and possibly take another radiograph. Depending upon the degree of fusion, exercise restriction may be altered.
Take your pet on leash walks for 30 to 40 minutes two to three times daily and allow full run of the house as long as there are no large flights of stairs that they are prone to run up and down.

**Weeks 9 - 12:**
At this point, your pet’s healing should be complete and should gradually return to full activity by the end of 12 weeks.

**Additional Instructions:**

Splints and braces, if used, should always be kept dry and clean. Any odors and/or persistent scratching are indicators that there may be a potential problem and should be checked by your veterinarian immediately. Bandages and splints should be checked weekly by your veterinarian or veterinary technician.
Feed your pet its regular diet but reduce it by 20-30% to allow for reduced activity.
Mild swelling may occur near incision. Your veterinarian should check moderate or severe swelling or any drainage immediately.

**Complications**

As with any surgical procedure, complications can occur. Unlike human patients who can be confined to a bed, our patients do not know enough to slow down when they start to feel better, so restricted activity is a major responsibility of you, the pet owner. Failure to follow these instructions carefully can lead to delayed healing or even failure of the implants. The most common complication is delayed healing or implant failure, where, despite our best efforts to stabilize the spine, individual patients respond slower than others. See the Atlantoaxial disease handout for a complete list of complications. If your pet seems to have worsening pain or weakness in the limbs after going home, please notify me or your doctor right away. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask your veterinarian or call me at the number above.