Nutritional Support Yields an Against-the-Odds Outcome

Laura Warcholek's advanced nursing and nutritional care helped change the trajectory for a formerly hoarded puppy with an often-fatal disease.

Sage's story started off bleak. The extremely ill beagle presented to the clinic after a local shelter rescued her from a hoarding situation where she was among 40 dogs. Her clinical signs? A foreboding but nonspecific mix of bloody stool, inappetence, and increasing lethargy.

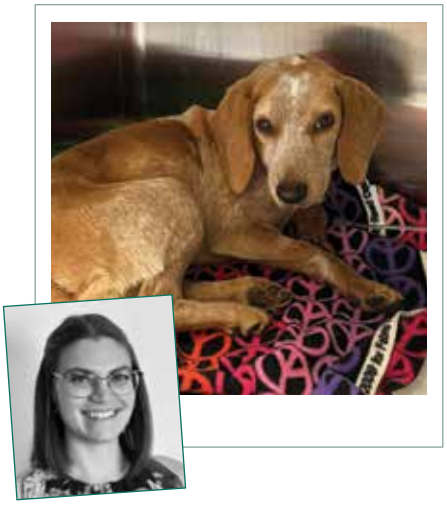
Laura Warcholek, CVT, VTS (Nutrition), and Rachel Soukup, DVM, took on the case. They suspected parvovirus, but that suspicion was quickly put to rest with a negative test result.

With Sage's condition poor, the duo hospitalized her and initiated supportive care. Warcholek began supportive feeding, made Sage as comfortable as possible, and obtained a blood analysis.

Due to an unknown medical history and questions about her current status, Sage was placed in isolation, meaning radiography—which would require movement near the general population—wasn't an option.

In attempting to rule out all possibilities, Dr. Soukop noticed a slight twitch in Sage's leg. She mentioned distemper as a differential diagnosis and from there the lengthy process to test and await results began.

Those results eventually validated the doctor's suspicion: Sage was diagnosed with canine distemper virus, a disease with a mortality rate of 50% in adult dogs and up to 80% in puppies. Distemper is also highly contagious, spread through bodily secretions like urine, saliva, and feces.



PROVIDER

Laura Warcholek, CVT, VTS (Nutrition), Crest Hill Cat and Dog Clinic, Crest Hill, Illinois

PATIENT

Sage, 1-year-old beagle

Given the confirmed diagnosis, the clinic continued its strict isolation protocol. Warcholek, noting Sage's deteriorating condition, suggested placing a feeding tube. The doctor agreed. They placed an esophagostomy tube, and Warcholek took the lead in providing nursing care, calculating Sage's energy needs, creating and administering her slurry, and keeping her and her tubes clean.

Warcholek, however, is quick to credit the full veterinary staff for Sage's care. "It was a team effort, and the whole clinic came together for her," Warcholek said. "We were going in during off hours to check on her feeding tube. We cleaned up after her. It was a lot at first."

That around-the-clock care is in addition to the innate challenges of nursing in isolation. These wards are often disconnected from treatment areas, and working in them requires extensive planning and collaboration. "It was a lot of going back and forth and calling others," Warcholek said. "Even going to the bathroom, we didn't want to expose healthy pets, so we were very, very cautious of that. We used a lot of PPE—went through boxes of gowns and masks and gloves, everything."

But to Warcholek, Sage provided an opportunity to help a "sweet dog" in need while using her advanced nursing and nutrition knowledge. "It was great that Dr. Soukop trusted us," Warcholek said. "She had faith in us and knew we could do it."

And with time and nutritional management, Sage slowly recovered. "We're still in that monitoring phase," Warcholek said. "There is a chance a few months postrecovery that she can have neurological signs since she was so sick, but so far, so good. She should have a normal lifespan." TVN

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