

## **Tick Borne Disease: What Every Family Owning an Ex-racer Should Know**

As owners, it is our responsibility to look out for the well being of our hounds. Most of us find our greatest fears are of the unknown. With tick borne disease (TBD) this statement, fearing the unknown, holds a great deal of truth. With knowledge, comes the power to help our dogs live longer, healthier lives. TBD is treatable, but only if you have the knowledge that your dog has been exposed. Please test your dogs, and take the time to understand the test results.

Our dogs are not native to this area. Many have traveled widely. In doing so, an unfortunately large percentage have been exposed to TBD. Some will fight off the infection with no one being any wiser, some will not live their lives to their fullest potential, because they are not as healthy as they could be, due to their bodies constantly fighting off disease. Others will die, some quickly, some slowly.

### **When to Test**

We believe it is important to test all dogs as they come off the track. In an ideal world, we would like to see them tested again, six to nine months after coming off the track or farm. If their exposure came at the end of their career, they may not have had a chance to develop antibodies if tested straight off the track. However, given a period of time, some will later develop antibodies when their immune system kicks in.

You may think, why not wait a few months and then test? The concern would be letting a tick borne disease get a few more months' foothold on your dog's health. Some greyhounds are retired because they are slowing down. It may be TBD that is slowing them down.

### **How to Test**

The test for tick borne disease is a simple blood draw for your greyhound. The test measures antibodies for the diseases. The measurement is in the form of a *titer*, which can range from 1:20 to 1:1,000,000.

Any vet can perform the blood draw. However, we recommend one laboratory to perform the test: ProtaTek Reference Laboratory in Chandler, Arizona. You will find more information about ProtaTek by following the web links at the end of this article.

### **Considering Costs**

The cost of the test is about \$150 to \$200 for a four-disease panel. During GPI's annual tick disease testing clinic, the cost is about \$82, for four tests plus an add on for Valley Fever. Testing for tick borne disease can be expensive compared to other blood tests, but it is often far less expensive than trying to figure out what is wrong when a dog becomes ill. Testing and treating while a dog is apparently healthy, is by far the most economical way to go. Early testing and treatment are also best for the health of your greyhound - with TBD, sometimes once a dog is displaying symptoms, it is too late.

## **The Diseases and Deceptive Symptoms**

The two most common TBDs in retired racing greyhounds are Ehrlichia and Babesiosis. Others are Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. Another similar disease, though not tick-borne, is Valley Fever. The tick test panel performed by ProtaTek tests for the first four of these diseases and you may request an additional test for Valley Fever.

The symptoms of TBD can be deceiving. TBD symptoms may mimic many other diseases. Because our local veterinarians may not be experienced in dealing with TBD, they may not know to look for tick borne disease as the cause of the ailments. Some symptoms can also be disguised as normal behavior within a stereotype. We can do our dogs a disfavor by telling everyone they are couch potatoes. Yes, our dogs are mellow dogs, but they are dogs. They should run and play at times. Sometimes the quiet dogs are dogs that simply do not feel well. Some, but not all, of the symptoms of tick borne diseases include: lethargy, no stamina, diarrhea, stiffness and pain in neck and back, loss of appetite, pale gums.

## **Treatment and Low Titers**

Drug therapy treatment for tick borne disease is effective and relatively inexpensive. The particular drug used depends on the disease diagnosed.

If your dog does test positive to exposure to a tick borne disease or valley fever, it is up to you, the owner, to be your dog's advocate. This is especially important in the case of a low titer. A low titer shows exposure, but dogs with a low titer may or may not be having blatant symptoms. Many vets advise against drug therapy when the titer is low. Many vets inexperienced in TBD and its treatment are not anxious to treat with drugs they normally don't use or carry.

We all want to trust and believe in our vets. We do, and should, respect their education and experience, but remember: your dog is YOUR dog. You may have more knowledge in certain areas than your vet. They can't be experts in everything. Educate yourself, and then work with your vet.

There are many cases where owners have requested treatment for a dog that tests with a low titer when a vet is advising against treatment. Because of our experience with the GPI tick testing clinics, we hear how a "total couch potato" dog with a low titer, not obviously displaying symptoms of being ill, becomes suddenly healthier, more energetic after drug therapy.

## **A Personal View**

Our plea for you to test your hounds comes from the heart and our own experience. We lost our first greyhound, Tigger, to TBD. We were owned by and loved Tigger for two and a half years. She was a happy and healthy sweetheart. A friend who owned greyhounds asked me about six weeks prior to Tigger's death, if we had tick tested Tigger. I told my friend, that we had had Tigger for over two years and she was the picture of health. Six weeks later, Tigger was gone

and our lives changed forever. I've never forgiven myself for not stopping and listening to my friend.

Two weeks after losing Tigger (June 1998), we adopted Dave, the perfect greyhound. One day, not too long after we adopted Dave, we thought we had a problem: Dave had not moved off the couch the entire day. Dave wasn't even three years old yet. Dave's adoption papers had \*Babesia\* listed on them. His titer was not a particularly high one. Several vets recommended against treating for Babesia, since the titer was so low. As Dave's health continued to decline, we took charge and asked our personal vet to treat Dave for Babesia. After treatment, Dave's health started an almost immediate turn around. We saw a puppy side to him that we had not seen before. Dave is now a spectacular ten year old who will be eleven this September. I believe, in Dave's case, he would not be here today, if John and I hadn't made the crucial decision ourselves to treat Dave.

Because we run the annual GPI Tick Borne Disease Testing Clinic, we know of many other Tiggers; each one breaks my heart. We have also heard many stories like Dave's. Not all dogs were as sick as Dave was, but their lives were changed for the better by being tested and treated. With each happy story, not only is there a dog somewhere living a longer healthier life, but a family being given additional time with their beloved family member. I LOVE hearing those stories.

Tick disease is not something to be feared if you are aware. These diseases do not need to be killers. Test your hound. Truly, it is a small thing to do for your beloved friends. Even a negative test result is good information to have. Should your dog ever become ill or have vague symptoms, you will have ruled out TBD. Obviously, not all our ex-racers have been exposed, but we believe that the percentages are high enough to warrant testing all our dogs.

## **Resources**

Here are some websites with excellent information on TBD. These websites will give you more information about the symptoms of TBD. They also have information on contacting ProtaTek Laboratory. They have a wealth of information:

[http://www.geocities.com/bo\\_freddy](http://www.geocities.com/bo_freddy) (Scroll down the left to: Medical – Tick Disease)

<http://www.greythealth.com/>

<http://users2.ev1.net/~vintage/tick.htm> (Lots of information and gives instructions for joining TICK-L, a tick disease discussion list.)

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<http://greyhoundpetsinc.org/rainbow/tigger.html>