

Maya's Story

By

Beth McMillin



Dr. Karen Tobias and Maya

I would like to share Maya's story with everyone in the hope that others can see the importance of understanding liver shunts and to encourage people to help support the research at the University of Tennessee through the UT Angel Program to find the genetic marker that causes liver shunts.

Our story began in July of 2005 when we got a yorkie/maltese mix puppy. We got this puppy from a local person here in Florida. This person's female maltese and female yorkie had both come into season at the same time and had mated with her male yorkie. The two females ending up giving birth to separate litters of puppies. The first litter of puppies produced 4 purebred Yorkshire terriers and then second litter produced four Maltese/Yorkie mix puppies. The odds of both females giving birth on the same day are pretty high, but believe it or not, the two different mothers gave birth to their puppies just hours apart from each other!! Two of the puppies from the litter of Yorkshire terriers were born with deformities and later died. The Maltese/Yorkie mix puppies all appeared healthy. This local person did not feel she could sell

mixed bred puppies, so she gave us a puppy from the mixed bred litter.

My husband Mike and I brought a little yorkie/maltese female puppy home and we named her Maya. Maya was just the cutest little girl I had ever seen, and she was a happy, quiet and well behaved puppy. We took Maya to the vet for a general checkup and started the normal procedure of immunizations and deworming. Two months after we got Maya, the problems began.

I remember coming home from work one Friday evening and my husband telling me, "There is something wrong with Maya, she has been vomiting all day." I had no idea what was wrong, but I could tell just by looking at Maya that she was seriously ill. It was 6 pm in the evening, and I knew my regular vet was closed, so I started calling around to emergency vet care clinics. I finally got a hold of someone and was told to bring Maya right in. We rushed Maya to the emergency clinic and they took her into an examine room right away. The emergency vet examined Maya and gave us a diagnosis of worms and severe dehydration. Since Maya had been dewormed previously, I had a difficult time understanding how she could have gotten worms again. The emergency vet recommended that they keep Maya for the night so they could give her IV fluids for her dehydration. We agreed and made arrangements to return to the emergency care clinic at 7 am the following morning. The following day, I returned precisely at 7 am and was told that Maya was now fine. The IV had helped to replenish her body with fluids and she had eaten a little that morning. Maya was very quiet but the vomiting seemed to have stopped. Maya was released from the emergency care clinic and we took her home.

I watched Maya very closely the day we brought her home, and by 3 pm in the afternoon, Maya began to go downhill. She started to vomit again, and she started to have strange shaking episodes as well as episodes of staring into space. She was rubbing her head against the couch, as if to relieve the itching. I could not figure out what I was doing wrong, and in tears, I called the same emergency care clinic. The emergency vet told me to bring Maya back in and he tried to reassure me that Maya most likely was released too soon and she just needed more IV fluids to build her strength back up. I took her back a second time to the emergency vet and they admitted her for overnight observation. I picked Maya up the next day - Monday evening. Maya did seem to feel better, and

although she was playing, I could tell she was not her normal self. We went to bed that evening, and at 3 am, I woke up to the sounds of Maya vomiting. She also appeared to be having mild seizures and the distant look in her eyes made me think she was dying. Once again, I was in tears and we made a third visit to the emergency care clinic. This time the emergency vet immediately started the IV fluids as well as running a series of tests that included x-rays, barium testing, and lab work. I thought the tests would never end, but I knew we needed to find out what was causing Maya to be sick. The lab work showed some abnormalities, but the vet assured me that the abnormalities were caused by Maya's dehydration. The X-rays and other tests all came back "normal". Once more, the emergency care clinic kept Maya for the night for observation.

That night we went home, and I began questioning myself whether Maya's illness was caused by something we were doing or something she might have gotten into that would make her sick. I decided to go out on the internet and do some searching using her symptoms to see what I could find. That is when I came across the University of Tennessee liver shunt website. I started reading information on this site, and I could not believe how closely Maya's symptoms resembled the symptoms of a liver shunt. Even as I read the information, my mind kept telling me that Maya could not have a liver shunt. I could not believe that there was a possibility that my beautiful little puppy could be this ill. Even in my denial, I had some unanswered questions. The University of Tennessee had an email address for a Dr. Tobias, so I send her an email asking more questions about liver shunts.

The next day we picked Maya up from the emergency care clinic, and once again the vomiting, seizures and staring episodes reappeared. Once more, for the fourth time, I called the emergency vet. The emergency clinic told me they had no idea what was wrong with Maya, but they could do exploratory surgery to see if they could find anything wrong. I asked the emergency vet if he had ever heard of liver shunts, and his response was that they had heard of liver shunts, but never experienced a patient with the disease.

We went home to decide what we were going to do for Maya, and the next day, I received an email from Dr. Tobias and Sue Schwarten with the University of Tennessee. Sue gave me her phone number and introduced me to the liver shunt chat group. I began to learn and question even more about liver

shunts. We also made the decision to take Maya to a new vet, Dr. Sarah MacMillan (no relationship to us) for a second opinion on her illness. Dr. MacMillan examined Maya, read the reports from the emergency care clinic, and within 5 minutes told us that she thought Maya might have a liver shunt. She also went on to tell us that she had never had a liver shunt patient before, but that she had been doing a lot of reading on liver shunts from a veterinarian at the University of Tennessee named Dr. Tobias. I exclaimed, "Oh my, I have emailed Dr. Tobias concerning liver shunts!" This new vet read up on liver shunts and called the University the Tennessee. UT recommended that the new vet run the pre and post bile acid test. The results of the bile acid test confirmed that Maya could have a liver shunt. Her pre bile acid test was 29.8 and post was 355.0. I was ecstatic to know that we had possibly found out what was causing Maya's illness. The new vet made the arrangements for Maya to go to UT for testing and possible surgery within a week's time. The week prior to our trip to UT, I contacted Sue Schwarten and Sue was able to help me. Sue informed me that Maya's diet was very important and we were able to start her on a diet that was low in protein and easier on Maya's liver. Once we started Maya on a diet of yogurt, vegetable baby food, and spaghetti noodles, the change in her was astounding!! The vomiting, the seizures and the strange staring episodes – all stopped. Maya actually seemed like her "normal" self!

The following week we made the 6 hour trip from Tallahassee, Florida to Knoxville Tennessee. Sue greeted us at the doors of the University of Tennessee veterinary hospital when we arrived. She made Mike and I feel like we were the only patients there, with the special attention she gave us. We then met our intern Trisha Webb, another wonderful lady. Trisha went over Maya's records and history with us and she made us feel so comfortable. She then took Maya from us and consulted with Dr. Tobias. Shortly afterwards, we were called back into the exam room. We met with Dr. Tobias and several other interns. Dr. Tobias explained everything they had gone over and discussed. I felt they knew everything they could possibly need to know about Maya! Sue stayed with us and comforted us and explained what was going on every step of the way. Dr. Tobias told us Maya would need testing and surgery. If not for Sue, I don't think I could have done what we had to do! We had to leave Maya and come back to Tallahassee for the week she would be at the UT vet hospital. The love and concern I saw in everyone's eyes at UT made me

feel comfortable with leaving Maya. I knew Maya was in excellent hands and Sue had given us her personal assurance that she would be making her morning visits and reporting to me on Maya's condition.

I knew without a doubt, that I would be receiving a telephone call from UT daily. Each day that Maya was at UT we received updates, and on the days the doctors were running tests, we received multiple telephone calls updating us. Maya was doing well!! Sue even got pictures for us of Maya with Dr. Tobias. Sue got lots of kisses every morning from Maya and would tell me how much Maya missed her Mom and Dad. What a great person!

The day of surgery was trying for us; we were so worried about our little 2 pound baby going through surgery. All these thoughts kept going through our minds; would Maya be okay, could her tiny body handle the surgery, would she get just the right amount of anesthesia? These were the questions we asked ourselves while she was being operated on. We did a lot of praying during that time, for Maya, the doctors, and everyone involved, including ourselves!!

Several hours went by, and we waited for the telephone call from UT telling us the results of Maya's surgery. We were very relieved to hear that Maya made it through the surgery, although the news we had waited to hear was not good. Maya did not have one shunt, she had multiple shunts and these multiple shunts were not correctable with surgery. Maya has what is called MVD. They also found while Maya was there that she had been diagnosed with a rare worm called macrocanthorhynchus ingens. This meant nothing to me, but they explained it rarely is found in dogs, is more commonly found in raccoons! They treated her while at the University for this particular type of worm. How she ever got this we have no idea. Maybe a raccoon had left feces in the yard and she got to it? This worm was just one more thing we would not have found or treated if UT had not checked Maya and treated her.

We went the following weekend to pick Maya up from UT. Once again Sue was waiting there for us when we arrived in Knoxville. We met Sue for breakfast and she sat down with us and explained once again what was happening and what we needed to do to keep Maya safe and healthy. Once we have finished breakfast, the three of us went to the UT vet hospital so we could pick Maya up. I was so excited, I felt like running

from the car to the building! Sue went back into the hospital area to let the UT staff know we had arrived. They brought Maya out and I noticed right away that her little tummy had been shaved, and she looked so funny!! She looked like she had a Mohawk down her back!! Dr. Souza came in and explained the surgery and everything they did. He then told me about Maya's diet and how important it was to follow this diet faithfully, if we wanted Maya to live. They sent Science Diet LD food home with us, lactulose, and directions for the use of milk thistle. Dr. Souza was great and we found him so easy to talk to and understand. Sue followed us out, asking if we had any other questions. I knew I had found "heaven" in this place!

Since Maya's surgery, Sue has continued to be a huge part of Maya's life. I don't know what I would do without her. If I have any questions or concerns regarding Maya, she is the first to help. The knowledge and understanding she has shared with us is priceless.

Each of our babies is different, what works for one dog may not work for another dog. You live and learn and each day you become more thankful for that day. This is one more day you may not have had if not for the doctors at UT. Through their research, we hope one day they will find cures for these diseases. The folks at UT are dedicated to providing us with the most up to date information through the research they continue to do. With our help and our babies we can help them do this. Participate in their studies if you can. Volunteer information, anything you can provide that you find may save the life of another baby. Through financial donations or helping in the study, you do make a difference. Someone else did this and helped save Maya and hundreds of other dogs lives. You can make a difference. Please help Dr. Tobias and the other doctors with their research.

Maya is now one year old. She is doing wonderfully. Nobody would ever know there is anything wrong with her. Through the wonderful education provided by the University, chat groups and loving friends we have done great. I thank you all.

Please go to the University Of Tennessee Liver shunt site for more information:

<http://www.vet.utk.edu/clinical/sacs/shunt/faq.shtml>

|