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CONSTIPATION/DIARRHEA

Your pet has been diagnosed as having either constipation or diarrhea. Constipation and diarrhea are not diseases, but are conditions that can be caused by many diseases. Both conditions represent a dysfunction in the normal process of defecation. This handout has been prepared to help you understand these conditions, their causes and treatments, and how to care for the pet with constipation or diarrhea.

SIGNS OF CONSTIPATION

Many things may cause constipation, but the most common are dietary and environmental factors.

Dietary:

Fiber in the diet is important for normal defecation in dogs and cats just as it is for humans. Insufficient dietary fiber can cause constipation.

Substances such as hair, bones, or foreign materials ingested by a cat or dog can form hard masses or concretions when mixed with feces and cannot be eliminated, resulting in constipation.

Water is essential to proper gastrointestinal function; therefore, if an animal is deprived of water, it will become constipated.

Environmental factors:

Changes which affect an animal's daily routine such as removal of the litter box, a dirty litter box, a hospital stay, or lack of exercise can also result in constipation.

There may be many other causes of constipation such as those listed below:

- Aging
- Fractures of the pelvis or pelvic limbs
- Lesions around the rectum
- Prostate Disease
- Spinal Cord or Disc Disease
- Large Bowel Nervous Disorders
- Tumors
- Metabolic or Endocrine Disorders
- Debilitation
- Dehydration

As you can see, there are many reasons your pet can become constipated. Some are not serious while others may be life threatening.

TREATMENT OF CONSTIPATION

To treat your pet for constipation, the underlying cause must first be determined.

Your veterinarian will perform a physical examination of your pet and will ask you about your pet's medical history, its diet and its daily routine. Blood tests, x-rays or other tests may also be necessary and will be explained to you prior to testing.

If it is determined that the underlying cause is due to disease or trauma, medical treatment may be necessary to correct the problem

HOME CARE MANAGEMENT FOR CONSTIPATION

Diets rich in fiber can be used to aid in the management of constipation in pets as in humans. The fiber increases water retention in the intestines, which softens the stool. The increased bulk also increases the propulsive movements of the intestine, helping to alleviate the constipation.

1. Twice daily, feed your pet a diet containing at least 10 percent fiber to stimulate bowel movement.
2. Do not give your pet bones or snacks and restrict access to foreign materials. Longhaired animals should be brushed daily. This will help remove excess hair that the animal might otherwise ingest.
3. Thirty to sixty minutes after eating exercise the dog to encourage defecation.
4. Maintain a clean litter box for the cat.
5. Provide free access to fresh water.

Managing your pet's care at home is an important part of its treatment. It is essential you follow your veterinarian's instructions. If you have any questions about your pet's medical care, please do not hesitate to ask. The hospital staff welcomes your questions.

SIGNS OF DIARRHEA

Diarrhea in a dog or cat is characterized by abnormally frequent, watery stools. Clinical signs associated with diarrhea include frequency of evacuation of loose feces, which results in an increase in the volume of feces passed. The diarrhea feces contain not only increased amounts of water and electrolytes, but may also contain mucus, blood, and fat or undigested food.

Diarrhea can originate from the small intestine or the large intestine (colitis) and is further sub-classified as acute (sudden onset of brief duration) or chronic (long-term). (See the Colitis brochure for a discussion of that condition. This brochure will be limited to a discussion of small intestinal diarrheas.)

Acute Diarrhea – Small Intestine

Acute diarrhea originating in the small intestine usually lasts less than 48 hours. The feces seldom contain mucus, but it is not uncommon to find blood in the feces. The animal usually loses its appetite or is anorexic. The feces are brown or reddish-brown in color. The animal exhibits a sense of urgency to defecate as well as an increased frequency and may continue straining after defecation.

Chronic Diarrhea – Small Intestine

Chronic diarrhea originating in the small intestine lasts 7-10 days or longer. The animal passes a large volume of watery feces and has bowel movements two or three times as often as its normal frequency. The feces are brown in color unless there is blood in the stool in which case it will have a black, tarry appearance. Little or no mucus is present in the feces (as opposed to Colitis, which may have much mucus in the diarrhea).

CAUSES OF DIARRHEA

The causes of diarrhea vary widely, but include bacteria, viruses, internal parasites and stress-induced factors. Diarrhea may also be caused by toxic substances that the animal ingests or by food allergies. A change in pet food, eating table scraps or rich snacks, or scavenging spoiled food from garbage may result in diarrhea as well. Organ dysfunction, especially the liver and pancreas, can cause diarrhea.

Diarrhea caused by internal parasites may be a continuous, chronic problem or be intermittent with a normal stool being passed between abnormal stools. Some parasites causing diarrhea in dogs and cats are transferable to humans. Therefore, it is important to identify the parasitic causes.

It is important to note that young animals may be more severely affected by diarrhea than mature animals. Puppies and kittens should be carefully observed because their condition could quickly become life threatening.

Diarrhea is a fairly common ailment among small animals. In cases of “non-specific” acute diarrhea, the symptoms can be effectively treated and should improve in a few days.

However, it is important to differentiate between non-specific diarrhea and diarrhea caused by a more serious health problem.

TREATMENT OF DIARRHEA

It may be necessary to withhold all food from your pet for one or two days. The more severe the intestinal disturbance, the longer the period the food must be withheld. Do NOT exceed two days of food deprivation in the cat. Continue to give your pet water during the fasting period.

You may be asked to collect a fecal sample for microscopic examination to help diagnose the cause of the diarrhea. Numerous fecal exams or rechecks may be necessary to detect internal parasites that can show up intermittently in the feces.

In some cases of chronic diarrhea, a biopsy is necessary. This procedure involves obtaining a very small section of tissue from the intestine for microscopic study. This can be done through a small incision in the abdomen and involves only a few stitches to close.