

Windmill Vets - Pet Advice Notes

The Ins and Outs of Gastroenteritis

The term “gastroenteritis” implies inflammation of the stomach and intestines. It is a descriptive term rather than a diagnosis and can be applied to any situation where one of our pets has vomiting and/or diarrhoea. Some episodes are acute and spontaneously resolve with or without treatment whereas others can last weeks or months. If gastroenteritis has lasted more than two weeks and there has been no identified cause or prolonged response to treatment, this is referred to as a “chronic” case.

In younger animals, under a year old, vomiting and diarrhoea are more commonly caused by dietary indiscretion (eating things in the garden or out on a walk) and infections. The latter can include viruses, bacteria and protozoa (such as Giardia). In older animals or those with a history of chronic gastroenteritis there can be an underlying disease. This may relate to the gastrointestinal tract or other organs such as the liver or pancreas and if there is significant weight loss, the possibility of a tumour or cancer can not be excluded without investigation.

A sudden change in diet or a different treat can also precipitate a bout of sickness or diarrhoea. Obstructions of the intestine can occur if a swallowed object is too large to pass through and typically becomes lodged in the outflow valve of the stomach or the small intestine due to the relatively narrow diameter in these locations. These “foreign bodies” can range from stones to chewed pieces of toy or bedding to food items such as bones and corn on the cob kernels. As no food or water can pass the blockage, the pet usually becomes acutely unwell and will often vomit many times in a 24 hour period.

Diarrhoea can affect the small intestine or large intestine. The former results in large volumes, low frequency and often colours such as green or orange whilst the latter will result in urgency, frequent small volumes and sometimes fresh blood or mucus in the faeces.

Once the vet has taken a clinical history and performed a physical examination, they may advise symptomatic treatment such as anti-sickness medication, electrolytes (like Dioralyte for people), probiotic pastes and a bland diet for 48 hours. However they may advise further investigation is necessary. Faecal tests can help identify infectious organisms; blood tests will inform the vet about the health of organs such as the liver and pancreas and whether there is evidence of damage to the permeability of the intestines. Diagnostic imaging with x-rays or ultrasound can be used to help identify foreign bodies or other abnormalities.

Christmas is on the horizon again and vets often see an increase in cases of gastroenteritis due to the prevalence of seasonal treats. Although vets are open throughout the festive period, there are probably more fun ways to spend your Christmas break!