

X-ray showing stones in the digestive tract.

FEATURE

Eating strange things

Foreign body ingestion

By Dr Hans Andersen

Pets, and especially dogs, are prone to swallowing objects other than food. Often the problems the objects cause are obvious, such as vomiting, or having a length of fishing line hanging out the mouth or anus, but clearly attached to something inside. Occasionally the problems are truly perplexing.

Pepe Pepperell fell into the very obvious category. Pepe featured in our last issue of *Paws for thought* as the dog who joins owner Pat in school visits, helping children learn to read. He also likes to play ball. Three years ago he nearly didn't survive catching a solid rubber ball. It wedged firmly in the back of Pepe's mouth and was a real challenge to remove.

The lesson here is to throw long. Play fetch, not catch! This is especially true with sticks, which can cause severe lacerations inside the mouth and throat of dogs!

Things were much trickier when Tess LeCren swallowed a ball because no-one saw it. Tess just became lethargic and unwell. She started vomiting, lost weight and became jaundiced and very anaemic. Tess' vet took tests which showed that her red blood cells were breaking down inside her body. This is an uncommon problem in dogs but easily the leading cause is IMHA – immune-mediated haemolytic anaemia. This is a condition where the body attacks and breaks down its own red blood cells. It usually responds well to treatment with immunosuppressive drugs. But Tess kept getting more anaemic and her abdomen was swelling so she was referred to Halifax.

Ultrasound showed a mass in her abdomen that we initially thought would be cancer. We took X-rays, and imagine our surprise when we saw a lizard inside the spherical mass. This was a foreign object! Tess needed surgery but, severely anaemic and on high doses of immunosuppressive drugs,

Case Study - Pepe



Ball - firmly wedged.

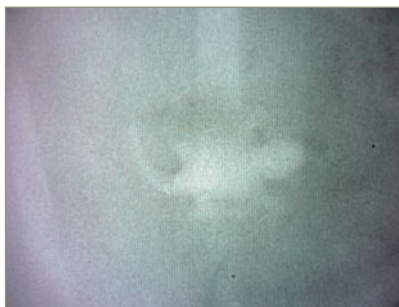


The culprit - a rubber ball.



Pepe back to his visiting rounds.

Case Study - Tess



X-ray showing the metal lizard.



The offending ball and lizard.



Tess - post surgery.



Case Study - Dudley



Dudley - post surgery.



The foreign object.



Damage to the intestine as a result.

she was a high-risk surgical candidate. Supported by blood transfusions we operated and removed the long-missing ball, complete with a toy metal lizard inside. During the months of exposure to strong stomach acid the ball had partly broken down, exposing the metal to the acid. The acid was leaching zinc from the metal alloy. Absorbing high levels of zinc causes red cells to break down in the blood stream. This was why Tess was so sick.

Tess has recovered well but is probably none the wiser! Many dogs that swallow foreign objects are repeat offenders. One dog had a fetish for chewing underpants and needed surgery on eight different occasions. Several times whole sections of damaged intestine needed to be removed. But it wasn't just the dog that didn't learn. The two teenage boys in the house never learnt to pick their underpants off the floor either!

Partial obstructions

Making a diagnosis becomes more challenging when the problem is caused by foreign bodies which do not show up on X-rays and which are just causing partial obstruction. Plastic used to wrap meat, knotted string from a rolled roast, chewed socks or underpants, and folded parts of balls or chew toys can all fit this category. With partial obstructions food still can get past so vomiting may be intermittent.

One of the tools commonly used to diagnose partial obstructions was invented in New Zealand and is called BIPS (Barium Impregnated Plastic Spheres). The barium makes the spheres show up on X-ray. Capsules containing 10 large (4mm) and 30 small (1mm) spheres are swallowed by the pet. As they pass through the stomach and intestines all the BIPS will be stopped by a complete blockage. If there is a partial blockage – and this could be a growth, an area of scarring, or a

Case Study - Zoe



Zoe.



A mysterious foreign body.



Zoe's chew toy.



foreign body – then the small BIPS pass through and the large ones are typically trapped, giving an obvious X-ray clue.

Complete obstructions

Common causes of complete obstruction are stones, bones, golf balls, corn cobs and peach stones. These cause little trouble while they remain in the stomach but once they pass into the intestine they are big enough to block it completely. If they wedge in the first part of the small intestine, the duodenum, no fluid or food can get past or get absorbed and the marked vomiting usually causes rapid dehydration and collapse. The foreign bodies may not be able to be palpated in the duodenum and if, like corncobs and peach stones, they don't show up on X-rays, your vet may need to do exploratory surgery.



Fish hooks

Fish-hooks can cause serious problems and are equally common in cats and dogs. They are rarely difficult to diagnose since there is often a telltale length of fishing line trailing from the mouth or anus, and they show up well on X-rays. But they can get stuck anywhere along the digestive tract from the mouth to the anus. A few moments spent removing the bait from hooks after fishing can spare much pain.

Signs that your pet may have swallowed a foreign object

- Vomiting is the most common sign and may be frequent or intermittent
- Diarrhoea, which may contain blood
- Abdominal pain may be shown by reluctance to move, a tense abdomen, hunched back, crying when picked up, or adopting the 'praying' position
- Loss of appetite
- Loss of weight

All of these signs are non-specific, and your vet will typically have to perform blood and urine tests to rule out other organ disease, as well as X-rays and ultrasound.

The Naughty Kid's Book of Nature

By Des Hunt, Illustrated by Scott Tulloch
Harper Collins NZ - RRP \$29.99

Nice kids learn about the life cycle of the monarch butterfly and about tadpoles turning into frogs.

Naughty kids want to know about squashed hedgehogs and dead pukeko.

Nice kids like to look at books with pretty pictures of puppy dogs and kittens.

Naughty kids would rather see blood and guts and maggots.

And road kill. Lots of road kill. Don't forget the road kill.

This is a book about nature for naughty kids. The Naughty Kid's Book of Nature is an informative, entertaining and educational book for children. Take a typical New Zealand road trip with Steve, from North to South, and with him discover the animals he finds along the way. At each stop Steve asks questions, trying to work out why the animals are what they are, what's special about them and just how long they have been in this part of the world. With road kill, bludgers, living and extinct animals, fact sheets and a glossary, this book is a fantastic and fascinating resource.

Des Hunt, an author and science teacher, is a passionate advocate for ecology and the protection of our superb natural environment. Scott Tulloch is an author and illustrator who also has a degree in Zoology.

Together, they have created this book to inform, entertain, and capture the imaginations of New Zealand children. By using familiar examples (pukeko, hedgehogs, and rabbits) they explain and expand on biological themes in the primary curriculum, in ways their readers might not expect.

