

Diarrhea

As a pet owner it is often distressing to have a sick or ailing pet. Diarrhea in your pet is one such ailment that can often cause discomfort for the owner as well as the pet by causing accidents around the house. Diarrhea is the passage of unformed, loose stools and may appear for many different reasons. This handout will review the causes of diarrhea, treatments for diarrhea and observations that will be helpful for your veterinarian to diagnose the problem.

Diarrhea occurs when digested food speeds through the digestive tract too quickly and forms loose, watery stools. It is also marked by the decreased absorption of water, electrolytes and other nutrients. The causes of diarrhea are wide ranging. Some animals experience mild diarrhea due to stress, allergies, change in food patterns, or stomach irritants. This stomach irritation can range from mild to severe and may be caused by some form of bacteria, virus, plant or chemical. It is important to remember that while diarrhea by itself is not a disease, it may be a symptom of a larger more complex problem.

Remember that variations in stools occur for many reasons. However, one of the concerning complications of prolonged diarrhea is dehydration. Observe your pet closely and if your pet has experienced diarrhea for two days, seems lethargic, refuses water or has other symptoms, contact your veterinarian immediately.

Before a treatment can be started, the cause of the diarrhea must be determined. There are many different tests that can be performed to determine the many causes of diarrhea. However, initially, a more generalized, cost effective and less invasive approach is often tried first. This approach calls for withholding food for 24 hours while encouraging water consumption. This allows the irritated stomach and bowels to calm down. Then gradually and in small portions, bland foods are offered to the animal. The foods most often recommended are white boiled rice, pasta, chicken broth and skinless chicken breasts. As the animals stools return to normal, then small portions of their normal diet may be gradually incorporated with the bland foods. If this generalized approach does not seem to be calming your pets diarrhea distress, then your veterinarian may perform more tests to determine if the diarrhea is a symptom of larger and more far reaching problems. Clinical workups may include blood work, stool samples, urine cultures and food trials. These tests will determine if the diarrhea is simply caused by a bacteria, virus or food allergy or if the distress is a symptom of larger issues, such as cancer.

In order to assist your veterinarian with the proper diagnosis, observe the following details about your pet:

How frequently is your pet defecating?

What are the consistency, smell and color of the stools?

Is your pet exhibiting any other symptoms such as lethargy, vomiting or weight loss?

Has there been any change to your pet's normal routine, food or environment?

Does your pet have access to small objects that might have been swallowed?

Has your pet escaped your house/yard recently and had access to foreign objects?