



DANADA VETERINARY HOSPITAL, P.C.

## **Chronic Vomiting and/or Diarrhea In Dogs and Cats**

Chronic vomiting and/or diarrhea are common problems in both dogs and cats. The actual vomit or diarrhea are not diseases but rather symptoms of a bigger disease that requires diagnosis. The path to this diagnosis can depend on many factors. The goal of this article is to offer some insight into the diagnostic pathways and treatment options available for chronic gastrointestinal disease.

### ***Urgency of Diagnostics***

The causes for chronic GI issues are too numerous to list. For this reason, there are many different tests that may be needed to make an accurate diagnosis. One of the factors that determine how quickly these tests must be performed is the condition of your pet. If their appetite is poor or non-existent or if weight loss is occurring rapidly, it is important that a diagnosis be obtained rapidly. If pain or a mass is present in the abdomen, tests need to be performed quickly. However, if a pet is eating, maintaining weight, and seems comfortable, the urgency of diagnostic evaluation is at the pet parent's discretion.

### ***Source of Vomiting and Diarrhea***

Vomiting may be due to disease in the stomach or intestines, or it may be due to disease in many other parts of the body (systemic disease). GI causes can include food sensitivities and allergies, dietary intolerance, pancreatic disease, parasites, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), bacterial or viral infections, foreign material in the gut, gastric reflux disease and many others. Systemic diseases that cause vomiting include liver and kidney disease, hyperthyroidism, diabetes mellitus, and Addison's disease to name a few. As a rule, most systemic diseases are detected with blood tests. However, few diseases in the stomach or intestines show up in those tests.

Diarrhea can result from the same systemic or gastrointestinal causes as vomiting. Diarrhea can be categorized based on the type of stools produced. Copious watery or dark stool is attributable to the upper GI tract (small bowel) and is associated with food allergies, most parasites, and infections, IBD, etc. Mucoïd or bloody stools are associated with smaller fecal volume and are attributed more to diseases of the large bowel. These can include certain forms of IBD such as ulcerative colitis, stress-inducing illnesses, and some parasitic diseases.

## ***Testing Procedure for Chronic Gastrointestinal Disease***

As mentioned, a diagnostic work-up for chronic GI problems involves a series of tests rather than one single test. The goal of the veterinarian is to work through the possible causes while maintaining reasonable control of patient symptoms. Some patients will only require a couple of these tests to establish a diagnosis and treatment plan. Others may require the full complement of testing to gain a definitive diagnosis. A typical work-up might look like this:

**CBC/Chemistry/Thyroid/Urinalysis** – These tests help to identify underlying electrolyte and metabolic disturbances outside of the GI tract that could cause GI symptoms. In most cases of IBD, these results are within normal limits. However, protein, cholesterol, and globulin levels may be off with IBD. Results of this blood panel may prompt further investigation if abnormalities are found.

**Fecal Analysis** – A standard fecal helps to identify parasitic infection.

**Diagnostic Imaging** – X-rays and abdominal ultrasound can help to identify thickening of bowel, foreign material such as metals that can cause toxicity, pancreatic disease, or tumors.

**GI blood panel** – A specific blood panel that screens for common diseases affecting the gut such as pancreatitis, B12 deficiencies, bacterial overgrowth/dysbiosis, and pancreatic enzyme insufficiency. This test requires a 12 hour fast. Abnormalities on this test confirm the presence of gut disease, and help fine tune treatment, but are not able to definitively diagnose IBD.

**Fecal PCR** – a DNA test to identify common and uncommon pathogens that can affect the gut's overall health.

**Diet and Medication Trials** – Since many IBD cases have a dietary trigger involved, a prescription hypoallergenic or gastrointestinal diet is often employed to see if the symptoms can be improved. These trials need to go on for 2-3 months, during which time all other flavored meds, foods, and treats need to be discontinued. Additionally, trials with common medications such as probiotics, anti-vomiting agents, and anti-diarrheals may take place concurrently with the diet to eliminate or improve symptoms. Response to therapy can be a useful guide to the veterinarian to help identify or rule out causes.

**Surgical or Laparoscopic Biopsy** – Biopsy is the gold standard and only definitive way to diagnose IBD. However, it requires a surgical procedure to obtain samples. This can be done by traditional laparotomy (surgical incision of the belly), or by endoscopy (minimally invasive sampling using a fiber-optic scope). Biopsies help to rule out cancer and may also inform the veterinarian on the best diet choice for treatment in some cases. During the biopsy process the surgeon will evaluate the entire abdominal cavity for abnormalities.