

Gastric Ulcers

By Dr. Karen Becker

Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker. Today we're going to discuss ulcers. Ulcers of the stomach or the intestine, or gastroduodenal ulcer disease, refers to ulcers found in the dog or cat stomach and/or the duodenum. Duodenum is the first section of the small intestine. These ulcers are seen most often in dogs, more so than kitties, but kitties absolutely can get ulcers.

Your pet's stomach acid is very acidic with a pH range of 1 to 2.5. This is deliberate, because of their scavenging nature as carnivores. Nothing much can survive a really acidic stomach pH, which keeps your carnivorous dog or cat safe from potentially pathogenic bacteria, contaminated raw meat, or other consumables like poop that dogs or cats might get into. Some animals are not able to eat any of those things and would die. But dogs and cats are equipped to be able to handle fresh raw meat-based diets because of their stomach acid.

The stomach plays a really important initial role in helping your pet digest food through its mixing actions and by secreting gastric acid and pepsin, which activates key digestive enzymes. The gastric tissues are able to withstand high acidic environment because they are equipped with a number of protective forces, including mucosal cells, tight junctions, and a thick layer of mucus that prevents acid-induced injury. There's also a high level of blood flow to the area, which prompts cellular metabolism in a rapid renewal of injured cells. The GI tract is really resilient and can heal quickly.

If gastric acid secretion increases to the point that the protective forces are overwhelmed in some way, then a gastric ulcer is often the result.

Causes

There are several potential triggers for GI ulcers. There are diseases that are known to increase gastric acid production that include acute and chronic kidney failure, tumors of the pancreas or duodenum, and mast cell tumors. Gastric ulcers also develop when the protective forces are inhibited or breakdown. There can be a change in mucosal blood flow, could be a risk factor for increasing GI ulcers.

Unfortunately, we see a lot of ulceration of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. In veterinary medicine, we call them NSAIDs. As well as glucocorticoids, which are steroids. For example, prednisone.

Hypovolemia, which is a decreased volume of blood circulating in the body, severe trauma, vascular thrombosis, and gastric dilation-volvulus (GDV) can also result in mucosal ulceration of the GI tract.

Other conditions linked to the formation of gastric ulcers include gastric tumors; inflammatory stomach disease; liver disease; hypoadrenal corticism or Addison's disease, which is adrenal failure; hyperacidity of the stomach; GI parasites; bacterial, fungal, and viral infections; as well as pythiosis, which is a condition caused by water mold. It's very rare. As well as helicobacter infection.

Dogs that engage in extreme exercise – for example, sled dogs, racing dogs, dogs dealing with a substantial amount of stress – are also at risk for GI ulcers.

Accidental poisoning is actually one of the leading causes of GI ulcer disease. This can be from plants. For example, toxic mushrooms, castor beans, or sago palm, pesticide or rodenticide toxicity, chemical poisoning often with ethylene glycol, or heavy metal poisoning involving zinc, iron, or arsenic.

Gastroduodenal ulcers are common in German shepherds receiving high doses of ibuprofen, which is an NSAID that we don't recommend that you routinely give to dogs. Rottweilers also have an increased incidence of stomach perforation and ulcers with NSAIDs. Now, keep in mind, in veterinary medicine, ibuprofen is rarely used, but we have a whole bunch of different drugs that we use kind of in place of what humans would take – aspirin, Tylenol, ibuprofen – with the same category of drugs in veterinary medicine, and they create the same GI side effects.

Symptoms

Gastroduodenal ulcers can cause a number of symptoms, which unfortunately often go undetected until they become severe. Some of the more common symptoms include anemia, weakness, weight loss, loss of appetite, rapid heart rate, bloody vomiting, or a black tarry stool (which is actually a sign of digested blood), abdominal pain, and signs of nausea (which is licking the lips or drooling).

Cats with GI ulceration rarely show specific signs, such as blood in the stool or vomiting. They can go undiagnosed for a long time. Kitties also tend to show more signs of life-threatening haemorrhage. They have a different category of symptoms.

Diagnosis

Your veterinarian can take a complete history and conduct a physical exam. He or she will also run diagnostics, including a CBC (which will check for anemia), a biochemistry profile, a stool sample, as well as a urinalysis.

Blood test in animals with GI ulcers may reveal anemia. If the bleeding is chronic, iron deficiency anemia can also be evident. Other bloodwork abnormalities may be decreased number of platelets (which are the cells that support blood clotting) and a higher than normal white blood cell count.

Feces will be tested for the presence of blood. A definitive diagnosis of gastric ulcers is typically made using endoscopy, a procedure that allows your vet to look directly into your pet's stomach and the duodenum with a small camera. The endoscopy will also allow your vet to remove any foreign bodies that might be present as well as take tissue samples of abnormal-looking tissue.

Treatment

The ultimate goal in treating gastroduodenal ulcers is relieving the animal's underlying reasons for why this is going on, and also, of course, making your pet feel better during treatment. However, since GI ulcers can be accompanied by other symptoms like haemorrhaging, shock, or serious abdominal infection, oftentimes intensive care is required to stabilize the patient.

IV fluids are given to maintain body fluid levels in some pets, depending on how much blood is lost, and sometimes transfusions are actually required. Animals will be placed on GI protectants and medications to reduce acid secretion while the GI tract is healing.

Now, hands down the two most common reasons I have seen ulcers in clinical practice are the 1) overprescribing of steroids or NSAID drugs, both of them, 2) as well as helicobacter infection secondary to an unhealthy GI tract.

Steroids and NSAIDs are used to control inflammation in the body. Some pets are very sensitive to even a few doses of these drugs. Just like people, they can run into problems after just a few doses of aspirin or ibuprofen. Many animals, however, can tolerate short-term use.

Actually a lot of conventional veterinarians rely solely on these drugs to control chronic conditions like arthritis or allergies. They just put these animals on steroids or anti-inflammatories, and they just leave these animals on steroids or anti-inflammatories. This is the equivalent of you taking prednisone, aspirin, or ibuprofen indefinitely. You could and probably will have significant GI issues over time, including GI ulcers.

There are some common sense approaches I suggest you follow. If your pet absolutely must be put on prednisone for a life-threatening condition, insist on concurrent GI protectants from your veterinarian. If your vet's only suggestion for pain, stiffness, or age-related issues is NSAIDs, honestly, I would recommend you consider finding a different veterinarian. Really.

It's not that these drugs are all terrible short-term, it's that there are so many other amazing treatment options that are non-toxic long-term, that if your vet's OK with just prescribing these drugs without any other supportive, rehabilitative, proactive solutions, I'm nervous about who you're partnering with to make the best decisions for your furry family members.

I have dozens of other free articles and videos about what to do for their next step if you're at a total loss about what to do with the pet that has achy joints or arthritis stiffness. Don't panic. But there are a lot of excellent non-toxic options, so you don't have to rely on some of these scary drugs.

Helicobacter Treatment

Pertaining to helicobacter, this is a very interesting topic, depending on who you ask. Conventional veterinarians will prescribe antibiotics to treat these opportunistic bacteria. Holistic veterinarians, including myself, will not. Helicobacter infections mean that the innate GI defences have been lost and a local bacteria has taken advantage of the situation. Whether it be too many antacids that were prescribed or H2 blocking drugs, a GI immune system that's just simply compromised from a biologically incorrect diet, or maybe some drugs that your vets have been prescribing.

All that to say, integrative veterinarians know helicobacter is nothing to fear, but actually more of a simple barometer about where your patient's innate GI defences are as well as systemic immune system. This is an important thing to take into consideration.

Prevention

Thinking about the first step of why helicobacter occurred, was the pet recently adopted from a shelter? Everything that happens in the life of a homeless pet can be summed up in one or two words as unspeakable. Animals that are rescue situations have a tremendous amount of stress. They really live through conditions that are just horrifying, so it's not surprising that these opportunistic bacteria had a chance to colonize.

Does your dog sit in a crate eight hours a day? Or is your cat constantly being pursued by a hyperactive dog? All of those things are emotional stressors but it's absolutely enough to live in day in and day out, enough to suppress the natural immune and GI defences that would prevent helicobacter from getting a hold. Evaluating what could be going on in your pet's environment is really an important step of identifying why this is there.

Next, you need to be thinking about is your pet immunologically supported by what she's eating? If you're feeding your pet a highly processed diet day in and day out, then certainly that's enough to cause what we call nutritional stress. Consider doing what you can to improve your pet's diet.

I have another video. It's called 15 Best to Worst Foods, and I would recommend that you figure out where you're at on the list and work on moving up the scale, so that you can decrease the amount of nutritional stress in your pet's lives.

Additionally, foods that contain pesticide residues, most notably glyphosate found in almost every conventionally grown fruit, vegetable, meat, and grains. It means that your pet probably had excessive chemical exposure if you're feeding processed foods. That will alter her GI defenses. Factory farmed animals require a tremendous amount of antibiotics that are passed up the food chain. Feeding free-range ethically raised meat is also an excellent idea to prevent antibiotic resistance.

Next, think about if you have environmental stress happening in or around your home. That could be PBDEs, which are flame retardants that are sprayed on dog and cat beds. That could be household chemical cleaners that your dog or cat being fussy and naked is exposed to all the time.

That could be a combination of outdoor yard pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers that your dog is walking through and then licking. Any chemical in and around your home will end up into your pet's mouth, because your dog or kitty will walk through them, and then through natural grooming they're going to consume them. Going green in your home and in your yard is a really great thing not only to improve your health but obviously the health of your animals as well.

Ditch the plastic food bowls and water bowls, and making sure that you're providing filtered water.

The next thing you want to think about: is your vet stressing your pet out? What I mean by that is conventional veterinarians have a number of routine normal procedures that are unbelievably taxing to your pet's immune and GI health, including way too many vaccines, and unnecessary antibiotics and dewormers. Just because your pet may be out and may eat or bite a poo now and then, instead of checking the feces and finding out if your dog or cat has parasites, they just automatically give dewormers.

These drugs negatively alter your pet's microbiome, the balance that's happening inside your pet's gut. Pairing with a holistic vet that weighs the use these toxins against the overall well-being of your pet's vitality is a really important step for your pet's long-term health.

There are lots of natural helicobacter treatments. In fact, I haven't had a single case of helicobacter not respond. Common treatments that integrative vets make, have you consider if you have a pet with ulcers are the use of berberine or grape root, bismuth, deglycyrrhizinated licorice (DGL), specific forms of aloe, specific strains of probiotic and mastic gum as well as a whole host of other homeopathics and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) remedies that your vet may consider.

Complete resolution depends on the underlying cause and the extent of the problem. Regular monitoring and repeat follow up examination is necessary until your pet's ulcers are completely gone. Preventing GI ulcers usually means preventing the underlying disease that causes them. Not every trigger for ulcers is within your control.

However, steps you can take as a pet guardian include feeding a balanced species-appropriate, organic, non-GMO, fresh food diet; being very vigilant in keeping your pet away from situations where he could be inadvertently poisoned or consume anything that was caustic to the GI tract; ensuring that every veterinary visit or treatment given in the lowest possible therapeutic dose; and also tittering in place of automatically vaccinating.

Taking your pet for regular wellness visits to monitor his overall health and check for the presence of hidden parasitic, bacterial, or fungal diseases is also really important.

As well as providing a low-stress environment and lifestyle for your pet that includes adequate but not extreme forms of exercise.